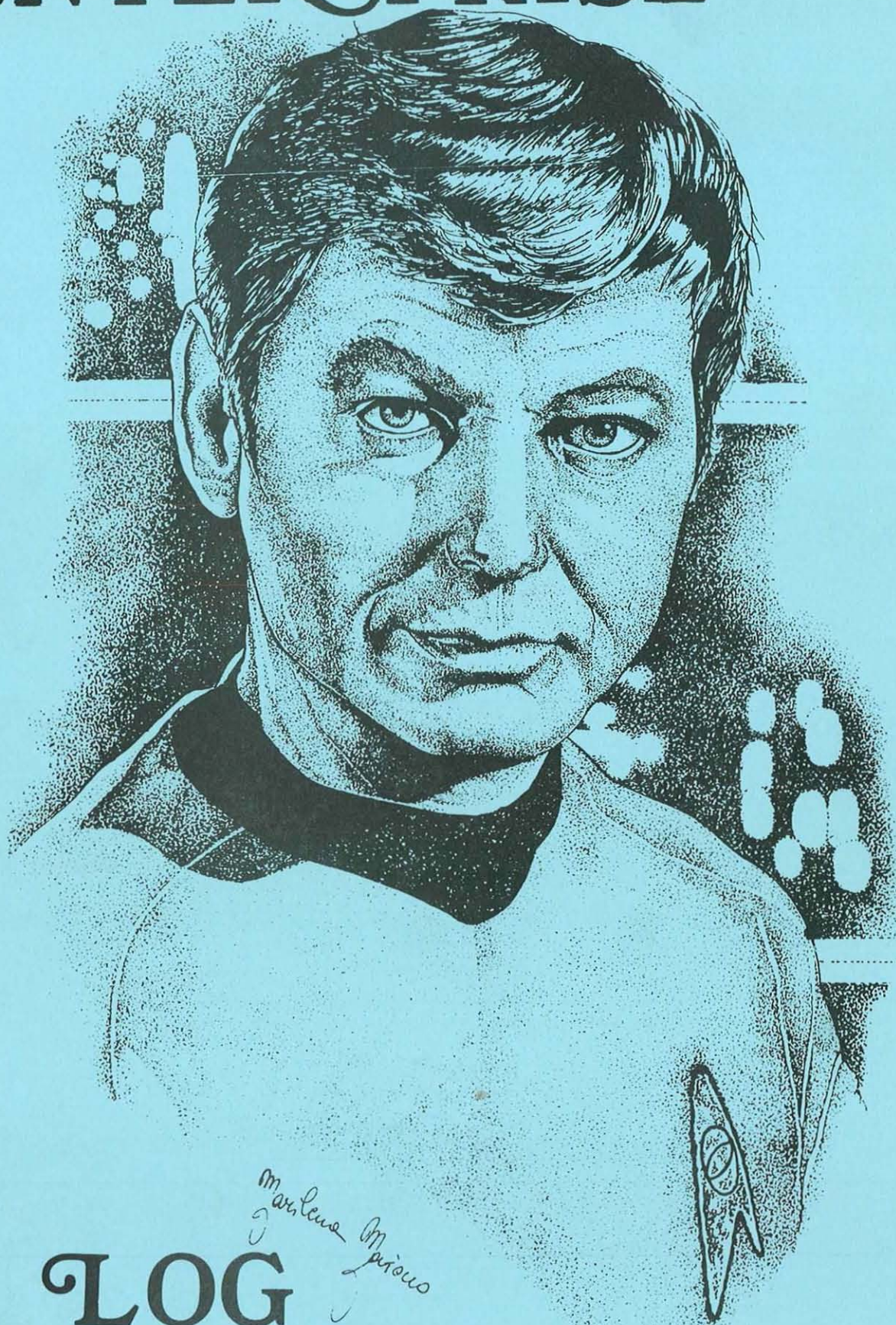


ENTERPRISE -

SCOTPRESS



LOG

ENTRIES

■ STAR TREK

FANZINE

80

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

Hello, and welcome to Enterprise - Log Entries 80

We are featuring three new writers this time, Karina Lumbert and Marcia Pecor from the United States, and Nicole Comtet from France. We think that you will enjoy their stories, as well as those of our regular contributors, Sandy Catchick, Brenda Kelsey, and Sheryl Peterson; also an all-too-infrequent appearance by Lynette Muir. Regular attendees at Midcon will recognise her setting! We hope to persuade Karina Lumbert to come up with a sequel to Pirate Queen - everyone who has read the story would like to see more of T'Kila - except possibly James Kirk.

This zine should be ready for RecCon, as should our TNG zine, Make It So 2. We intend to retain Log Entries as a purely series-based zine, with Make It So covering TNG; response has shown that this is what most of our readers wish.

The IDIC zines IDIC LOG 1 and 2 should also be out this year; they too will observe the policy of separating series and TNG material.

We hope to see as many of you as possible at RecCon; please do come and say hello. Unfortunately it looks as though we will not manage to be at Midcon this year; its later date, and Sheila's return to the classroom, mean that we wouldn't reach Leicester until nearly midnight at the worst time of year for driving. We're sorry about this, as Midcon is always enjoyable, but it can't be helped.

Peace,



We are looking for action-adventure stories, preferably with some character inter-relationship. Alternate universe stories are acceptable, but for ScotPress even these should not be movie-based, K/S, or involve the death of main characters, or be primarily about other ships. These are, after all, "The voyages of the Starship Enterprise..." For IDIC zines our policy is much simpler; no X-rated stories, please! Anything else will be considered, as long as it is primarily about the established Trek universe characters or races - for example, we would consider a story that was wholly about Klingons or Romulans as these races appear in Trek. We are not, however, in the market for stories that are solely about totally original characters or races of the writers' own creation as this is entering the realms of original Science Fiction rather than Star Trek.

Submissions may be sent to either -

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TO SLEEP - PERHAPS TO DREAM?

by

Brenda Kelsey

The cabin was a solid, low, long structure crouching in the snow in the clearing between the heavily laden trees and the iced-over lake. Kirk, still angry, looked at it, and ignored the flitter pilot as he left in a flurry of disturbed white. The cabin looked old. It wasn't - couldn't have been - but it looked it.

"Don't worry. I'm sure that the inside will be much less primitive."

Kirk looked at the heavily muffled figure of his Science Officer, ankle deep in newly fallen snow, and blithely smiled as more big flakes floated down onto them.

"Fully insulated, heating throughout, automated kitchen. Come on."

Spock stayed silent as he waded to Kirk's side, and then the two men trudged to the entrance. Kirk felt the tight little ball of anger start to grow again when the lights failed to respond both to his hand waving over the sensor and his command of 'Lights on!'

"I know where the auxiliary power supply will be. Won't be a minute or two before I get this fixed." He dumped his bag down and squelched away, his wet boots making little squeaking noises on the floor tiles as the snow dropped off them.

He stomped back in something less than a minute.

"I'm sorry, Spock. The power cell for the auxiliary unit is dead, and the solar panels seem to be shut down."

"If the standard design has been used the solar panels will be placed on the roof, where they can function as both tiles and collectors," offered Spock, speaking for the first time in two hours. He'd been silent since the location of the shore leave cabin that they had been allocated had been detailed by the insincerely apologetic and smugly nasty Admiralty aide who had explained that all the other sites had already been allocated to Enterprise crew.

"And the roof is 18 cm deep in snow! We can't even call for a fresh cell. 'Leave your communicators behind. The cabin has a comms unit. Have a rest - you've earned it!'" Kirk quoted savagely. "My apologies, Mr. Spock," he said formally, wondering how many times in the last few days he had tried Spock's patience by apologising. (Or not, goaded his conscience. There were still so many slights and words hanging between them.) The realisation that Spock hadn't responded to any of his apologies with the Vulcan-normal response of 'Apologies are unnecessary' eased the anger.

Then Spock said, "Unnecessary, Captain. Whatever petty spite has caused these problems is directed at us both. I welcome the knowledge that I am included as a target for this ire. The sort of

person capable of such actions is not the type I wish to be associated with."

Kirk wondered if Spock was gently teasing him, or trying to reassure him, or both. "A comfortable if somewhat cold sentiment, and one with which I heartily agree." He looked around the room. "And if a Starship Captain and the best Science Officer in the 'Fleet can't rise above these minor inconveniences, then we don't deserve our reputations."

Kirk stumbled over his feet as he crossed the room in the deepening twilight and opened a chest by the fireplace. "Logs!" he announced with satisfaction. "But no kindling. Still, it's dry, and we can do some whittling."

"Whittling?"

Spock's figure was a darker shape against the light of the open door. Kirk couldn't see it, but he was sure down to his bones that one eyebrow was canted higher than the other.

"Wood carving. We'll never get a fire started with these huge lumps, so we'll have to split them up. Have to wreck a few knives," he elaborated.

Kirk returned from the kitchen area with knives to find the front door closed and Spock industriously sorting through the wood. He gestured at a selected few when Kirk knelt beside him.

"Those logs have flaws in them, and should be easier to disassemble."

Kirk couldn't help it. He giggled, and carried on giggling throughout the process of 'disassembling' the logs, while Spock whittled to the best of his ability and relied heavily on Vulcan dignity to maintain his decorum.

To light the fire Kirk resorted to the old method of rubbing two sticks together.

"Is this method effective?" queried Spock after a longish pause in the conversation during which nothing much seemed to happen to the sticks.

Kirk looked up, anger sparking in his eyes, to catch the barest hint of a smile in the gathering gloom. The anger died immediately.

"Well... it's recommended by the Boy Scouts." Kirk waited four heart beats. "But I never was a Boy Scout." He waited four more beats. "I was always prepared, though."

"Perhaps the method is only productive for those who have been Boy Scouts?"

Kirk bit the inside of his cheek. McCoy had claimed, loud and long, that Vulcans didn't have emotions, and certainly not a sense of humour. Spock had been wary, elusive, and absolutely poker-faced when confronted by McCoy at his noisiest, which had been for most of the shakedown cruise, and so McCoy hadn't had the opportunity to experience Spock's gentle teasing; but then Spock had yet to experience the sharper edge of McCoy's tongue, McCoy being at his most caustic when most quiet. Kirk put the idea firmly aside. There would be time to sort that problem out later; right now he had

more than enough to cope with.

"Could be. Are there any Boy Scouts on Vulcan?" Kirk offered the sticks to Spock, who pretended to ignore them.

"I am not aware of that organisation being established on Vulcan. However, I did leave some time ago, and I can only speak of things as they were." Spock sounded apologetic.

"You haven't been back?" Kirk restarted the rubbing action.

"There was little point."

Kirk took the hint and concentrated on the wood. Then he looked up. "Food!" he said. "No power - what about the food storage? Is there any food? Or are we going to be hungry for our stay?"

"I will investigate the possibilities." And Spock padded away in the gathering dimness. His shoes did not squeak, Kirk noticed.

Kirk resumed his task with an air of feverish desperation. Whether it was in response to the fresh assault, or the effect of the heated imprecations that Kirk mentally addressed to the innocent wood, will never be clear. When Spock returned to inform a relieved Captain that the food storage units were maintained from an independent self contained power source (but that the food processors and cooking units were not) a small fire was leaping enthusiastically in the hearth.

"See!" said Kirk, gesturing grandly.

"Congratulations, Captain," intoned Spock.

"Hmm," replied Kirk. "You look cold."

"Despite the efficiency of these thermal garments the temperature in here is somewhat less than that considered to be optimum by Vulcans."

"In other words, you're cold, and it's going to get a lot colder during the night. As the bedrooms won't be heated it'll be sensible to stay here by the fire." Kirk proffered the suggestion almost diffidently. Vulcans were renowned for their strong adherence to etiquette, and privacy of sleeping arrangements - no matter what small indications of tolerance had been shown - could well have been an absolute requirement for Spock. It was one thing to be able to work together as a command team on the Enterprise, but the situation they were now in hadn't been covered by the extensive pre-mission practices. Kirk simply didn't know so many things about the enigma he'd chosen to fight Starfleet for.

"Affirmative. It would be illogical to allow the fire to extinguish, having expended so much energy in obtaining it."

One thing was definite, decided Kirk; Spock could use logic to justify any activity that he wished to undertake.

"Quite," agreed Kirk dryly. "And it would be illogical for you not to take advantage of that quilt on the couch, wouldn't it?"

Spock looked at the massive cloth as if seeing it for the first time. The vast square was draped over the couch, itself a huge and

rather ugly piece of furniture that faced the fireplace. Spock bent closer, examining the fabric in the uncertain light of the flames.

"This is hand-produced, Captain. It is far too valuable to be used as a blanket."

"Rubbish. If it hadn't been intended for use it would have been stored away safely, not left lying about on the couch."

Two can chop logic, thought Kirk smugly as he pulled the quilt off the couch and draped it about Spock's shoulders. "There. That'll stop a few draughts."

"The construction of this cabin is quite sound. I have not detected any draughts?" The querulous note warned Kirk of dangerous waters, and he changed tack.

"Having seen to the outer man, let's deal with the inner. Do you drink hot chocolate, Mr. Spock?"

"Yes, but the power is not available..."

"Maybe not in the kitchen, but we have a fire." He picked up a brand and lit his way into the next room, returning juggling with an assortment of bottles, jars, mugs, spoons and a long-handled saucepan. "Guess we'll just have to destroy some more of the kitchen equipment," he announced cheerfully, and got busy with the fire.

In what seemed to Spock an amazingly short time he was presented with a mug of steaming, hot, fragrant chocolate and a choice of several different kinds of cookies, all of which he declined. The excellent dinner which had been provided by the smug aide - 'to help pass the time until a flitter is free for your use' - that they had shared before travelling to the cabin was still too recent; not that it stopped Kirk, who nibbled and sipped while chattering on about the steps they would have to take the following day to make the cabin a comfortable proposition for their leave.

"Spock!"

His name roused him, and he looked around.

"You were asleep!" accused Kirk.

"Yes, sir." Spock was horrified at his lapse of manners and control.

"You'll be more comfortable on the couch. It isn't as hard as the floor." Kirk prodded the mass with a critical finger. "Not quite as hard," he amended, examining his finger for damage.

"Captain, I..."

"Jim. You did agree to call me Jim when we weren't on duty," reminded Kirk. "And if we're going to spend the night together..."

Spock found that he was lying down on the couch with his Captain - 'Jim', amended his conscience - arranging the quilt snugly around his shoulders.

"Sleep well, Spock."

Spock made one last attempt to maintain his sense of duty.
"The fire..."

"I'm not sleepy yet. I'll feed it for a while, and then put a couple of the big logs on. The embers will last 'til morning, and I'll do quite well in the armchair; it's got a quilt too."

Spock gave in and drifted off to sleep.

Kirk pulled the quilt from the equally massive armchair, wrapped it around himself and sat down on the floor, leaning back against the couch. Spock's quiet breathing was a comfortable counterpoint to his own. He was still not quite sure why Spock had accepted his almost careless invitation. Perhaps he too had felt a need not to be totally alone, or had merely decided to accept because he had felt it was his duty to the man he had decided to accept as Captain. Kirk looked over his shoulder, to find that Spock had burrowed further under the quilt.

No. Not duty. Perhaps some small spark of the instinctive kinship that both had experienced at their first meeting had survived in the ashes of their recent disaster, had stayed alight despite Gary, and Starfleet.

Behind him, Spock stirred uneasily and mumbled something too indistinctly for Kirk to understand. Kirk, automatically and without conscious thought, laid a soothing hand on Spock's shoulder.

"Shh, it's all over now. Go back to sleep."

Spock quietened immediately, and Kirk turned back to feed the fire, not realising the significance of what had just occurred, just feeling thankful that Spock was at last getting some long delayed and much needed rest.

Sleep. Sleep had been a rare luxury.

Sleep was a precious commodity. Few people on the Enterprise had been sleeping well, if at all. Those who did doze off, too tired to stay awake any longer, had nightmares.

Jim Kirk was no exception. Since the events at the edge of the galaxy he hadn't slept for more than an hour at a stretch before his own private nightmares blasted him into wakefulness, and it was beginning to show. Piper had developed the habit of following him around like an unwanted shadow, watching him and asking unexpectedly painful questions at bad moments. Kirk was developing a decided antipathy to the doctor, and had taken to trying to avoid contact with him whenever possible. Had he been reacting in a halfway normal manner Kirk would have been seriously concerned about the situation developing between them. As it was, he couldn't summon up the energy to be even mildly bothered.

He sat up tiredly, pulled the rumpled sheet straight, and grimaced in distaste as the sweat-dampened material clung to his legs. He abandoned the bed and went to stand in the shower stall, trying to relax as the warm water washed away the stickiness from his body.

Even that didn't work.

Some pithy comments made by Piper about the length of time he took to shower, in connection with considered statements about washing away guilt, drove Kirk out of the stall before he had truly finished. Picking up the towel he dried himself, patting dry the numerous still painful bruises which Gary had inflicted on him during their fight. Listlessly he shrugged into his heavy towelling robe and went to his desk.

Even the simple action of drying and dressing brought memories of Gary crowding in. Gary teasing him about the old-style robe; Gary substituting the comfortable cloth for a diaphanous negligee of net and feathers; Gary laughing at him when he came storming out of his cabin to find his treasured robe.

Kirk sat down and leaned on the desk, looking blankly at the bare top, trying to stop his thoughts squirrelling around the same closed-loop pattern. Maybe if he did some work?

He reached for a file from the omnipresent stack of paperwork which afflicted every Captain, and found that his hand closed on thin air. It was only then that the fact that his desk was bare of all reports finally sank in. His first reaction was a wave of murderous rage directed at Piper, who he instinctively blamed as the culprit. The rage passed as swiftly as it came, leaving him trembling and nauseous. He rose and wobbled his way across to the private coffee dispenser that he'd had installed. It was one of his few luxuries, and was one that both Gary and Piper had commented on. He drank the first mug, black and strong, standing by the machine, and carried the second back to his desk, where he sat and stared at the steam rising from the fragrant liquid.

"I wonder how many other people have done this: sat and watched steam rising while they try to figure out what they did wrong."

Kirk voiced the question aloud, and his voice echoed back at him. He drank the second mug in reflective silence, his thoughts calmed and almost idling. It was, he realised, the first time that he'd used the coffee machine since the day he'd killed Gary.

He put the cup down carefully, vastly surprised that his hand wasn't shaking. He was shaking inside, but outside, no. He considered his hands, scratched and bruised, and not the least like the hands of a murderer, because they were his hands.

He picked the coffee up again, sipping the brew automatically. He felt... different... normal. It was a strange feeling, to feel normal after so much had happened to him. The training cruises, designed to blend a team of strangers into a command team ready for the journey out into unexplored territory, had seemed unending and had left him with the subliminal feeling that something was wrong with the setup.

Despite his efforts to ignore it the feeling had persisted, and he'd taken his doubts to McCoy, glad to be able to unburden himself to the older man who was both friend and unacknowledged father substitute. Bones had listened sympathetically and had offered two solutions. Either Kirk wasn't ready for command, or there was something wrong, something which only he, Kirk, as Captain of the Enterprise, had noticed.

Viewed with the luxury of hindsight Kirk now knew just what it was that had been bothering him. The unbalancing of the command team by the abrupt removal of Uhura and McCoy had left Gary

exposed. Mitchell, although a popular officer in his own way, hadn't fitted into the niche assigned to him, hadn't blended in with the other members of the command team; hadn't, Kirk ruefully acknowledged, made any real attempt to do so. Gary, abrasive and challenging, at odds with the rest of the crew, had relied on his friendship with Kirk to retain his place. And he, Kirk, had blindly stuck with that friendship.

As events had proved, the friendship had been - from Gary's side - a hollow sham. Hadn't Gary got both birthday and name wrong on the gravestone that he'd created on Delta Vega?

Tears stung at Kirk's eyes. He mourned the loss of a friend, and the loss of the illusion of friendship. Gary, the user, the despoiler, had taken even that from him. The surge of anger flickered again, a rebellion against the maudlin thoughts. How could Gary have taken away something which had never existed? Now if it had been Bones, or Spock...

Kirk looked at his bare desk again, sure beyond any doubt as to who was doing his paperwork; and, Kirk was certain, all the paperwork that Gary, as Exec, should have done.

Barefooted, Kirk padded across his quarters, out into the corridor and along the short distance to the entrance to Spock's quarters, sited next to his own, as were the rooms Gary had used. Gary hadn't decorated them, or left any impression on them beyond a jumble of meaningless rubbish which Kirk had dutifully pawed through, then had thrown away. Gary had used the rooms in just the same manner that he had used Kirk, leaving only discardable rubbishy feelings behind.

He leaned on the entrance buzzer, and only then wondered if Spock was still on duty. With a start Kirk realised that he had no idea of the state of the duty roster.

"Come," solved his dilemma, and he entered with a rush.

"Spock, I ..."

The words died in his throat as he took in dim lighting, the brighter pool about the desk solidly heaped with the small squares which held so much of the petty, tedious details necessary to maintain the operation of a Starship, and Spock's bowed head.

"Spock?" Hesitating in a totally uncharacteristic fashion he edged his way towards the still figure. "Please, Spock?"

Spock shuddered, then slowly raised his head, his eyes closed. Kirk found that he was holding his breath only when the lids flickered open and wary brown eyes looked into his. He sank into the visitor's chair, unable to contain his fright or relief.

"Don't do that," he pleaded. "For a second there I thought that I'd see silver!"

"I could not be sure that you would not."

"You dreaming too?" All his uncertainty rushed into words, not giving Spock a chance to reply. "I am. Dreaming. I dream that I'm dreaming. I dream that I have silver eyes, then I wake up and go and look in the mirror, and I have. But I'm still dreaming, so that when I do wake up... When I find my eyes looking back at me... I

find that I'm waiting... to see if I'm still dreaming... I'm falling apart, Mr. Spock. I'm a danger to this ship and all aboard. You're going to have to relieve me of command."

Spock swallowed hard, aware as never before of his lack of skill in such delicate matters as reassuring Human egos of their true value in the scheme of things.

"Captain, in my judgement the very fact that you are questioning your fitness to command proves that you should still be in command. Had you been affected in any material way by the attempt to penetrate the galactic boundary you would not be acting as you are now."

"That's nice to know," Kirk said listlessly. "Are you dreaming?"

The resulting silence drew his gaze up from his feet. Spock's hands were resting on top of the desk, fingers so tightly intertwined that ivory gleamed at every knuckle; his face was a blank mask.

"I find that I am experiencing the same... dilemma as you and the majority of the crew."

"It could have been me," Kirk said softly.

Spock licked his lips, the first time Kirk could remember seeing that gesture from him. "It might still happen... to me."

Kirk slapped a hand over Spock's in an instinctive gesture of surprise and protectiveness. "What?"

"I have reviewed the information available to me. Further analysis has led me to arrive at certain conclusions. The three personnel with the highest PSI ratings aboard this vessel at the start of our current mission?"

"Gary, Dr. Dehner..."

"And myself. Your own rating is comfortingly low." Spock met Kirk's horrified gaze as levelly as he could. "I am attempting to monitor my... situation as closely as I can, given the current circumstances. You have my word that, should I find myself affected, I will suicide immediately."

Kirk's guts turned to ice as he absorbed the twinned threat, knowing that Spock would do just as he promised. His grip tightened.

"Have you asked Piper?"

"No!" Spock said the word explosively, jerking his hands out from under Kirk's. Then he ducked his head in what in a Human Kirk would have pegged as shamed embarrassment.

"That was a pretty definite no, Mister. I take it that you do have some pretty definite reasons?"

"I... They are suppositions only."

"Share them." The command snapped out, then more gently, "Please?"

Spock finally looked up. "My facts are few. My conclusions are..."

"Good guesses. C'mon, Mr. Spock. I know that you prefer nice, safe, unassailable conclusions, but the circumstances are such that I'll forgive the lapse this time and settle for your good guesses, just this once."

"Twenty nine of the crew were left behind at Starbase Q14, on Marvinian."

"Yes?"

"I find it a most troublesome coincidence that all, without exception, have PSI ratings greater than that recorded for Dr. Dehner."

"Oh?" A cold sensation, as if an icy finger had run the length of his spine, raised Kirk's hackles. "Oh!"

"If they had all been aboard when the penetration of the galactic barrier was attempted..." Spock's voice died away, as if he were unwilling to utter more words about what would be a damning accusation.

"We'd have had 31 mutated Humans aboard." Kirk shivered, then straightened as his mind started screaming obvious conclusions of its own. "They were left behind because 'Fleet ordered them to be left behind."

"The reasons given are varied, and all are possibly valid, but the probability that the generation of orders for those particular crew members is both genuine and coincidental is... very low."

"Not a precise number?"

"If you wish me to compute the odds...?"

"No. Save your strength. We may - will - need it."

Kirk got up and paced backwards and forwards, his bare feet making no noise on the deck. He was doing some very furious thinking, and not liking any of his thoughts. He finally sat down, looking gravely at Spock.

"What else have you come up with?"

"I re-examined the recorder buoy ejected by the Valiant. There are minimal indications that the logs have been played before, and that the records have been enhanced to make them more comprehensible."

"You think that Starfleet had already found the log, played it, analysed the contents, figured out what had happened, and had it put back where we could find it, to give us some clues to work with."

"That was my conclusion. Our approach vectors were predetermined in the ship's operational orders."

"But why didn't they just tell us what they thought could happen?" Kirk blurted out.

"Conjecture only. The reason for not informing us of their

'knowledge' was so that whoever would become affected by the boundary would not see that information in our minds, and so be forewarned. We would have speculated on monitoring procedures and failsafe plans. It is our nature, and duty, to do so. Starfleet was denying an information source to them."

"If this scenario is real then 'Fleet must be monitoring us. They would never take this big a risk without some way of transmitting a warning if it went wrong."

"I believe that they have a monitor aboard."

"Piper?" In the light of Spock's vehement rejection of the man it was an obvious choice.

"I think so. There are some interesting anomalies in his career record that indicate that he is."

"Anomalies?"

"According to the records he was posted to serve aboard the *Courageous* as Senior Medical Officer. I happen to know that during the period indicated he was not the Senior Medical Officer of that vessel."

"How do you know?"

Spock frowned slightly. "The doctor who held that post aboard *Courageous* caused... an incident... aboard the *Intrepid*."

"The all-Vulcan ship?"

"Yes. The... incident did not receive wide publicity, but I am certain of my facts. His career record is false in at least one respect."

"So it could be completely false?"

"Starfleet could generate a completely fictitious record for our computers. Also..."

"Yes?"

"You are aware that Vulcans are touch-telepaths?" Spock's tone indicated that this widely known fact did not always meet with acceptance.

"I am also aware that Vulcans are a highly ethical race."

"We have strong moral and cultural codes which strictly prohibit the casual pilfering of mental emissions. I try to maintain my mental shielding so that I do not inadvertently intrude."

Kirk nodded, knowing full well that Spock's mental shielding was designed to prevent loud and untrained Humans intruding into Spock's mind, rather than vice-versa.

"Dr. Piper insisted on carrying out several unnecessary medical examinations. During that time I became aware that there were no mental emissions from him at all. Dr. Piper has absolutely impervious natural mental shields; he is, in effect, mind-blind. I doubt that even Mr. Mitchell's augmented abilities could have drawn

information from his mind. However, the records provided by Starfleet indicate that Dr. Piper is averagely Human in this, and all other respects."

"Damn them!" The statement was without heat or rancour.

"It is our duty to discover, and investigate, such hazards."

"Duty! We lost nine people!"

"I am aware of that."

"Sorry, Spock. I'm not angry at you. I'm just angry."

"Considered logically, the Starfleet strategy is flawless. They placed the best personnel in a situation for which they had some broad operational parameters, and established a monitoring system which, if it survived, would have an unparalleled opportunity to evaluate the responses and actions of the personnel involved."

"You sound like you approve of their strategy."

Spock licked his lips again. "I understand the logic behind the decision, and also their desire to obtain further data about a fascinating phenomenon."

"But you think that their methodology stinks! You don't have to answer that."

There was another silence, then Kirk ventured, "What do you think Starfleet hoped to gain by leaving you aboard?"

"Information about the effect of boundary penetration on non-Terrans. Doubtless it would have been deemed unwise to risk a purely Vulcan officer to the augmentation process, the enhancing of already high abilities which had additionally been trained."

Kirk winced and nodded. "We survived because Gary had to learn what he could or couldn't do. And they picked you because one of your ancestors married a Terran, and you lost out in the genetic roulette."

Spock flushed slightly, sending the colour tone of his face from greyish towards its normal pale green shade. "To be strictly accurate, the ancestor in question is my father. My mother is... as Human as you are."

Kirk accepted the gift of openness with the dignity and reserve he felt was its due. In return he decided to ask a question which had decidedly personal implications for him. "Do you think that Starfleet was using the situation as a final Command test?"

"I have considered that probability and find that the odds are for the supposition. If you wish the exact odds...?"

"Some other time." Kirk waved the gentle teasing away. "I would like to hear your analysis, though."

"The parameters that I have been able to identify gave you a test which operated on several levels. The person most likely to be augmented was a close personal friend, one to whom you owed your life. It is a matter of record that you place great worth on the ties of friendship; the primary test would have been created because

Starfleet wished to ascertain how far you would go to preserve a friend when your ship was in danger. The secondary test, if the augmentation did not take place, was whether you would recognise the imbalance in the command team, and act upon it."

"So. Starfleet thinks that my weakness is friendship. I had already noticed about the way Gary fitted - didn't fit. I talked it over with Bones."

"I suspected that you had, and also that Mr. Mitchell was aware of this. The removal of key personnel from the Command team offered Starfleet the opportunity to place their observer aboard, and to add personalities who would be useful in the observation of normal and emergency routines."

"Dr. Dehner."

"Her presence would have been as a 'mirror' for Dr. Piper, a remotely controlled yet independent observer. Her personality profile was such that a conflict between herself and Mr. Mitchell was inevitable. I doubt that Starfleet envisaged that she would be augmented." Spock sounded slightly puzzled, as if there was something else, something that he could not explain in words, bothering him.

"Inevitable. Human or otherwise, they were bound to fight. She saved us all by fighting Gary. He had me beat."

Another long silence followed Kirk's admission.

"Yeah. Good old Gary had me beat. Still, things could have been worse."

"Indeed. Starfleet could have allowed Dr. McCoy to remain aboard."

"I know that you two don't exactly see eye to eye, but Bones is a good... friend." Kirk's voice choked off as he finished the sentence.

Spock shook his head. "I find Dr. McCoy's 'bedside manner' to be noisy and highly illogical, but that is not what I was referring to. Dr. McCoy's PSI ratings are marginally higher than Mr. Mitchell's. He would have proved just as effective a subject for the primary test as Mr. Mitchell, and the secondary test would have become whether you recognised the effect of Mr. Mitchell's absence on the efficiency ratings."

"Bones, turned into a god! At least Starfleet were kind enough to spare me that."

"I doubt that kindness had very much to do with their decision. Your... attachment to Dr. McCoy is, in many respects, far stronger than your attachment to Mr. Mitchell. I think you would have found it a great deal harder to make the decision to destroy a benevolent god."

Eyes narrowing, Kirk asked a question which bothered him. "As I recall, you didn't have any trouble in reaching the decision to destroy Gary."

Spock bowed his head. "Mr. Mitchell did not approve of my posting as Science Officer. He felt his friendship with you

threatened by my existence. He presented me with sufficient evidence of his increasing malevolence." Spock's eyes flickered involuntarily towards the case which held his chess set.

Kirk got up and opened the lid. The board was a collection of minute flinders, the ornate chessmen that he had admired and which had first tempted him to play with Spock were shapeless globs of matter.

"I'm sorry. I should have listened to you. I promise I will give your advice due weight in future."

"There will be no future."

Kirk slammed the lid closed. *"You were not altered!"*

"Starfleet will wish to know why I was not. I expect to be posted away from the Enterprise so that I can be studied in detail."

"No way. Absolutely no way. Apart from being the best Science Officer in the 'Fleet you're the best chess partner I've had in a long time; and besides, who else do you think is going to help me do all that paperwork?"

Spock essayed a faint shift in facial muscles, his equivalent of a tiny smile. "I thank you, for I should prefer to remain; serving on the Enterprise with you in command would have been... a fascinating experience."

"There are ways, and ways, Mr. Spock. Not logical. Not per the regs, but remarkably effective. I'll work at it. And you can hand over some of my paperwork. I know that I've been less than competent these last few days. It's about time I started doing my job again. I've just had a thought. If you and I are here, and Gary and Lee are dead, and Uhura isn't aboard, you persuaded Scotty to have the con?"

"He judged it wiser to remain in the Engineering Section. He is of the opinion that the repairs may hold until we reach Starbase Q14, but is not sanguine about certain relays we obtained on Delta Vega. He was most disparaging about the workmanship found at the plant, and intends to place a formal complaint about it."

"So who has got the con?"

"I asked Mr. Sulu to undertake the duty. He accepted with alacrity."

"I wonder if we can get him to stay on as helmsman. Chances are he only moved off the bridge because of Gary. Now, about this paperwork..."

The Observation Deck was quiet. Normally it would have held a fair proportion of the off-duty crew watching their sublight approach to Starbase Q14, which was an engineering first. The incredible design, which combined practicality with breathtaking beauty, would have been a perfect excuse to hold an impromptu party. As it was the recent incident had disturbed the normal way of things, and Kirk found that he had the Observation Deck to himself. He also found himself hoping that the deserted deck had been caused by the mission, and not by his own erratic behaviour.

He knew that he'd been difficult to live with, by turns morose, bitter and angry. He knew that Spock had been virtually running the ship, doing his own scientific duties, all the work previously done by Gary and most of Kirk's routine jobs as well as assisting Scott and the engineering teams; and, Kirk finally admitted, shielding the remaining bridge crew from the bitter edge of their Captain's tongue.

Even after their midnight discussion about Piper and Starfleet's culpability Kirk had been unable to achieve anything more constructive than a blanket acceptance of any decision made by Spock, unless it was to bitterly criticise those decisions.

The whole mess was taking its toll of Spock. He had only realised this at the end of a vicious encounter on the bridge when it had suddenly dawned on Kirk that the Vulcan was looking tired and drained, and was almost visibly bracing himself for the next insult. Kirk had fled.

"Why am I doing this? He deserves better from me," Kirk asked the stars. "Am I that poor a specimen that I can wilt at the first real test?"

Kirk blinked away sudden tears. Maybe that was the problem. This was the first real test. He'd commanded ships before, had been in battles, mortal danger, and he'd survived all of them more or less intact. Just a little repair work in Sickbay and he'd bounced back. But before, on all occasions, there had always been a senior officer around. Someone else had been in charge. Someone else giving the orders, doing the thinking; taking the responsibility. This had been the first time that he'd really been the senior officer, the ultimate arbiter, THE representative of the Federation.

Chin sunk on chest, Kirk watched unseeing as his ship slowed and swung into a parking orbit about the space station. His thoughts were turbulent, winding about the central theme of *Am I good enough to do this job?* Driven into moving, he got up and paced the deck.

There could be little doubt, if there had been any before, that Starfleet had set him a command test, and that Gary and Dr. Dehner had been the protagonists.

Subliminal clues stopped him in his tracks. Racing beyond conscious control his thoughts took facts, ideas and guesses and rearranged the whole into a new and deadlier pattern.

What if?

What if Gary and Elizabeth hadn't been the protagonists that Starfleet had arranged for him?

What if Elizabeth had been augmented purely by accident, along with the other crew members who had died?

What if they had meant the Enterprise to be the battleground for Gary - and Spock?

He sat down on the deck, leaning against the vast window of transparent aluminium, wishing that he'd never been born, and yet trying to marshal the idea into a coherent, provable framework. Proof - that's what he needed. Failing that, some solid circumstantial evidence. He grimaced at the apparent silliness and

said,

"Computer."

"WORKING," announced his ship.

"Tie in all computer banks. Create a chart. Include all Enterprise personnel, those on ship, on detached duty, and deceased within the last 12 days. Include all Valiant personnel listed at last port of call. Display, listing highest to lowest PSI ratings. Initiate."

There was a delay during which Kirk counted up to 23. A section of interior wall stopped pretending to be an Andorian sunset and displayed a list of names. Kirk had to force himself to leave the window.

"Computer. Show Valiant personnel in green. Detached Enterprise personnel in yellow. Crew still aboard in red."

"WORKING." And the panel changed to show the colours.

"Show the names Mitchell and Dehner in black."

Kirk stared at the list. It was headed by the name of the Valiant crewman who'd been augmented, with his own crew and Valiant names intermingled in no particular order. Spock's name appeared two-thirds of the way down after most of all the names in red; Gary's and Dr. Dehner's were very near the bottom, and were followed only by the dead Enterprise crew.

The more he stared at the list the more Kirk frowned. Surely a touch telepath would have a higher PSI rating than the one shown for Spock? Surely he'd have a higher rating than the one shown for, say, McCoy? Hadn't Spock said that night that the three people on board with the highest rating had been Gary, Elizabeth and himself?

"Computer?"

"WORKING."

"Is the method for determining PSI rating in Vulcans different to the method for Terran-Humans?"

"AFFIRMATIVE."

Kirk nibbled a lip, trying to frame the next question so that the computer could operate on it. "Is there a way of comparing the Vulcan PSI scale with the Terran-Human scale?"

"AFFIRMATIVE."

"Recast Mr. Spock's PSI rating using the Human scale; and state error variance."

"WORKING. ERROR VARIANCE OF METHOD IS 16.32%."

The screen display changed and showed Spock's name at the head of the list. Kirk nodded. Vulcans would test for different things, so the scale would have to be different too. It seemed that Spock had been the target for the 'Fleet's grand enterprise; Piper's comment when he'd revived Kirk had been more revealing than he had realised.

'At least Spock is alive.' What did they plan to do? Send Spock back to try again, or maybe - as Spock thought - study him in some laboratory to find out why he hadn't been affected? It still didn't explain why Gary had been chosen.

Unless Gary hadn't been chosen!

Kirk looked at the list again. "Computer. Highlight the names of the Valiant crew members listed as killed by the boundary."

The names glowed. All were shown as having higher PSI scores than Gary's.

Now why, if the Boundary affects people with high PSI ratings, does it kill some and not others? mused Kirk. And why does it leave others untouched? The answer must be the strength of PSI that each person has, that much is obvious, so why did it kill the Valiant people and change Gary and Elizabeth?

"Computer?"

If the computer had been Human the tone of the voice which drawled the question would have had it examining its conscience for misdeeds. As it was the computer merely said, "WORKING."

"Has the method of determining PSI ratings in Humans been altered since the tests were given to the crew of the Valiant? If so, describe the time scale involved and general details of differences between the tests."

"THE PSI TESTS WERE AMENDED 52 STANDARD SOLAR YEARS AGO TO INCORPORATE METHODS USED BY THE VULCAN SCIENCE ACADEMY TO MEASURE VULCAN ABILITIES. SEVERAL TESTS WERE CREATED SPECIFICALLY TO TEST FOR TALENT INDICATORS FOUND IN HUMAN SUBJECTS AND NOT IN VULCAN SUBJECTS. THE CONSENSUS IS THAT THE VULCAN TESTS GAVE A MORE PRECISE MEASUREMENT OF ABILITIES, COVERING A WIDER RANGE OF TALENT INDICATORS."

"Are the PSI scores shown for the Valiant crew based on the old or the new levels?"

"OLD LEVELS."

"Is there any method of converting a score from the old method to one using the new?"

The computer understood the question and answered, "AFFIRMATIVE."

"What's the degree of error in the conversion?"

"BETWEEN 8 AND 19%."

"Where is Mr. Spock?"

"IN HIS QUARTERS."

"Computer off."

Kirk felt angry; cold and angry. The men who had set up the experiment hadn't bothered to check for changes in the measurement of abilities. Even if they had there was no way that the error in conversion would have been acceptable in an experiment of that

magnitude.

He strode along the corridor, welcoming the anger and disgust that flooded through him. It felt good. Not numb, not normal, just good - alive.

He signalled for admittance to Spock's quarters, slipped in through the barely opened door and slapped the privacy light on.

"Mr. Spock?"

"Sir." Spock rose politely from his chair, his attention still partly drawn to the screen on his desk.

"What's so interesting?"

"Dr. Piper is gathering data for analysis. He has just accessed my personal log, and is now tapping into your personal log."

"You mean the official log?"

"Your *personal* log." The emphasis was on the middle word.

"Can you stop him?"

"Affirmative." Spock bent to touch the key pad.

"Wait. Let me think. He's got to get that information off the Enterprise. Has he got storage set up on the base computer?"

"Negative. A transfer of data of this volume would show on the Security monitors. Also the sources from which he has drawn that data - medical records, official and personal logs - would trigger transference shutdown. I suspect that he intends to copy his unauthorised computer storage to non-volatile data squares and beam down with them."

"This unauthorised storage - can you wipe it clean?"

"Affirmative." Spock was regarding his transformed Captain with curiosity, and, Kirk thought, something which might just have been hope.

"Do it."

"Dr. Piper will simply requisition more storage. He has been granted computer access codes which allow him to do this. Moreover, he will be warned that we are aware of his activities."

Definitely hope, thought Kirk. "Your recommendation, then, Mr. Spock?"

"Allow Dr. Piper to believe that he has succeeded. I can command the computer to copy an adequate volume of spurious data instead of the contents of his storage."

"Nice. I like it. Do it," snapped Kirk. "Please."

Spock turned to the keypad and his task. When he looked up there was a distinct twinkle in his eye. "Dr. Piper is now copying his storage area."

"Close," commented Kirk. "Can you destroy the area?"

Spock inclined his head, and did so. "The computer will now deny that the storage area exists, and that it ever did exist. I have instructed it to forget the access codes supplied to Dr. Piper, and also that I gave it those instructions. I have established traps to ensure that you are informed of any further authorised additions and activities generated by non-standard Starfleet codes."

"All that in what? Three minutes? You had it all prepared."

"It is my duty to be prepared."

"So much confidence in me? After how I've been behaving?"

"Your character is most clearly defined, and predictable. As for your behaviour, the crew will believe that you were merely 'leading Dr. Piper on'."

"Are you forgetting that this is all top secret good guesses?"

"No. I am confident that the abilities of this crew match those of their Captain. You arrived at certain conclusions first, because you have access to more data and are more accustomed to speculation of this nature. I expect that Dr. McCoy and Lt. Uhura will establish the same scenario within 36 hours, and that a further 18 of the senior crew will do so within 48 hours. The probability is 93.482%."

Kirk sat down. "I want to tell you something that happened to me when I was 5, maybe 6. I know that you don't pry into personal matters, but I think that I should share this story with you."

"When I was 5 - or maybe 6 - my father came home to stay. He was on shore leave, and me and Sam - my brother - were really excited. He almost ignored us, was curt when he did notice us, and finally we got packed off to bed. I couldn't sleep. Finally, about 2 in the morning, I crept back downstairs to try and talk to him again."

"I remember he was sitting by the fireplace, a bottle in one hand and a glass in the other. I guess now that he was trying to get himself mindlessly drunk, but at the time I didn't realise that. All I knew was that he didn't like me any more, and I wanted to know why."

"Captain..."

"My name is Jim. Listen."

Spock found that he could almost see the scene Kirk described.

"Pa?"

"Uh? Jimmy? Why aren't you asleep?"

"I came to apologise."

"What for?"

"For whatever it was that I did wrong that got you mad at me."

"Ah Jimmy. You didn't do anything." Geordie Kirk hugged his son until the tension left the slight body and it rested trustingly against his chest. "What made you think I was mad at you?"

"Well, I have done a few things to make Mom mad," admitted Jimmy bravely.

"Did she ground you?"

"Yep."

"Then it's all over. Nothing to do with me now."

"Oh. Pa? Who are you mad at? Can I help?"

Geordie's grip tightened, then relaxed. "No. No, I'm afraid that you can't. In fact, I doubt you'd be able to understand what is wrong. It's one of those adult-type problems that don't make sense to boys and girls."

"Are you sure there's nothing I can do?" asked Jimmy wistfully.

"Well... You could try remembering something for me."

Jimmy sat up, eyes sparkling. "Sure. Teacher says I'm real good at remembering things."

Geordie smiled and accepted this statement, although not at face value as Jimmy obviously did. He wondered a little bitterly just what devilment his younger son had performed to goad the teacher into saying that, fretting that he was missing so much by being in Starfleet.

"One day, Jimmy, a long time from now, when you're all grown up and chances are, with a ship of your very own; one day someone somewhere is going to make a decision that is going to hurt you. It'll make you very angry, and you'll want to do something to make those people sorry for having hurt you. But the bit of you that'll be inside, that'll make you a good Captain, will understand just exactly why those people did what they did. You'll accept that it, the decision, was right and proper and necessary, and it'll make you real mad.

"What I want you to remember, Jimmy, is that what you decide to do when you find out about that hurt will be the most important single decision you'll ever have to make. It'll affect you for the whole of the rest of your life, so when you decide on what you want to do, you've got to be absolutely clear about the consequences. Do you understand?"

"No, Pa. But I'll remember until I do."

Kirk cleared his throat a little self-consciously. "I never did find out what it was that upset him so. I went back to bed, and in the morning... well, it was as if the previous day hadn't happened. We had a great time.

"I know how he felt. I do understand why they set us up, and I don't like it. I'm going to ensure that they never do this sort of thing to my ship and my crew again. Has Piper beamed down yet?"

Spock blinked, then interrogated the computer. "Yes."

Kirk reached over, flipped the comms unit and said, "Security."

"Security. Baillie here, sir."

"Ah, Mr. Baillie. Dr. Piper has beamed down to the Starbase."

"Sir?"

"On my authority he is not to be allowed back aboard. Not for any reason, no matter who issues the order. If and when he does try, divert the call to me, and if he beams aboard without authorisation from me - which he will not get under any circumstances while I am Captain of this ship - you are to throw him, and whoever is with him, into the Brig."

"Yes, sir."

"Kirk out."

"Was that wise?" asked Spock.

"My pa always gave me good advice, Spock. If I let Starfleet get away with this then I'll never be able to trust any order from them. I'll always be looking for an ulterior motive. I might as well quit now. This way it'll be out in the open. They'll know that I know. If they want to replace me then it's better now, before the mission starts. What do you think of the prospect of serving aboard a ship captained by a maverick?"

Spock tilted his head. "All Humans are mavericks when measured by purely Vulcan standards. At least I can be reasonably confident that I will not become bored."

"I'll do my best to ensure that you'll always have something interesting to do. Er... we've been offered shore leave, and I've requisitioned a cabin for while the ship is being checked over. Will you do me the honour of sharing it?"

"The honour will be mine."

Kirk cleared his throat. "Whatever. Now I suggest that you go to bed and go to sleep. The first thing that McCoy is going to do when he gets back aboard will be to run medicals on us. So if you don't want to spend your leave in Sickbay I suggest that you rest up. Oh yeah - and eat something, too."

"I will take note of your suggestions."

"Do that. I'm going to go and upset some Admirals. You do realise that you'll have to pull a double load - First and Science Officer."

Spock looked squarely into his Captain's eyes. "That should stop me being bored," he commented dryly.

"Goodnight, Spock."

Kirk left, chuckling, and went to the Bridge to find that word of his order about Piper had preceded him, as he had hoped that it would. Standing by the centre seat, which was occupied by a self-conscious Sulu, he asked for shipwide communications.

"This is Captain Kirk. We are now in orbit around Starbase Q14, and shore leave facilities on Marvinan have been offered for use by all personnel. Before you depart I want to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to you all. You have come through a stiff test with great credit, and have proved that this ship and its crew are more than ready to depart on her five-year mission. Which we will do after we've had some shore leave and Mr. Scott is satisfied with the repairs. Make the most of it - I can't guarantee when or where the next will be. Kirk out.

"You want to ask a question, Mr. Sulu?"

"Ah yes, sir. Mr. Spock said he would talk to you about me staying aboard as Helm."

"He did, and I've already put through the posting. Mr. Spock is going to be taking shore leave with me, so can I leave it in your capable hands to hand the con to Uhura before you beam down? I doubt that I'll be able to prise Scotty out of Engineering to cover the gap. I know that this will delay your leave..." Kirk let his voice trail off apologetically.

Sulu shrugged one shoulder. "What's a couple of hours?"

"Thanks."

Kirk left the Bridge in the sure knowledge that far more than 20 of the senior crew would soon be in possession of the interesting facts he had just let slip, and that the personnel on the Starbase would soon be informed that his crew had started to take their leave. He wondered how soon it would be before Piper found Spock's spurious data, and what the man would do then.

A log falling from the fire jerked Kirk back into the present. Starfleet, or some small-minded official, had assigned a very unsuitable holiday home to them. Viewed with hindsight, the very pettiness of the gesture was indicative of the whole tone of mind that had greeted him on his arrival at the Starbase; and the short, explosive interview with the senior officers who had gathered there to see the results of their experiment had done nothing to soothe him. At least they hadn't court martialled him. Yet.

He leaned forward and poked at the fire, adding one of the fast diminishing supply of logs to the embers. "Have to find the wood pile in the morning," he said to himself.

"No need, Jim. Ah brought a power cell for yuh."

Kirk whirled about, coming up into a half crouch as the voice startled him. "Bones? What are you doing here?"

"Ah told yuh, Captain suh. Ah brought a power cell for yuh-all." McCoy tossed the disc up and down for emphasis. "Yuh surely picked an out-of-the-way place to spend yuh leave."

"I thought that you'd been asked to assist Dr. Piper in his 'evaluation' of my command decisions?"

It had been one of the many things stated during the row with the Starbase commanders which had infuriated Kirk; using McCoy to pry into his patients to help out a nothing like Piper.

Kirk slowly realised that his favourite doctor was swaying gently, as if influenced by a strong wind. "You drunk?" he ventured.

"Yuh insult me, suh. Ah am never drunk." The haughty stiffness melted into a silly grin. "Ah have got to admit that Ah am no longer entirely sober."

"What happened?"

McCoy absently tossed the cell from hand to hand. "Not a great deal. Ah got called into a meeting, told about the mission *and the reasoning behind it* and was ordered to give mah fullest cooperation to Piper and his so-called team of experts. Did you know he's an Admiral?"

"No, but it figured. And?" Kirk prompted.

"We had a few differences of opinion."

"I'll bet."

"Jim. Why did you do it?"

"Do what?" asked Kirk innocently.

"Put on that theatre with Spock. And tamper with Piper's records."

"Hell, Bones. Ah didn't tamper with them." Kirk mimicked McCoy's accent. "Ah got Spock to do it. Piper was stripping out entries from the personal logs. Now I don't mind him using the medical records that he put together, but I wasn't about to let him get away with that sort of invasion of privacy, not on top of everything else that he's put my people through. Spock simply diverted spurious data to the data store instead of what Piper thought he was getting. Spock assures me that it will be impossible to prove that we did anything to the records. He's got the Enterprise well trained."

"Spurious data? Yuh call 1,723 recordings of Holst's Planet Suite spurious data?"

Kirk looked fondly down at the still sleeping occupant of the couch. "You classical little Vulcan you."

"Yuh mean that was his idea?"

"Yep."

"But that was... was..."

"A joke," completed Kirk.

"Joke," managed McCoy, after several attempts to say the word. "He's a Vulcan."

"So?"

McCoy squinted at the portion of hair that was still visible above the quilt. "He okay?"

"You're the doctor."

"Now don't you start!"

"Eh?"

"Piper!" exclaimed McCoy bitterly. "He gave me this speech about how it was mah duty as a doctor to help him evaluate the records, to expand the boundaries of science, to help heal people." McCoy almost spat the words out. "Ah told him that the records he wanted me to evaluate were outside mah field of competence. Ah told him that Ah'm a doctor, not a music critic. So now Ah have the Admiralty mad at me too. Hey. He's still asleep?"

"Hot chocolate."

"Hot chocolate?"

"Give a cold Vulcan hot chocolate and it sends him right off to sleep."

Kirk offered the information as one confirming a great secret, and McCoy looked at him keenly, noting the small contented smile and the relaxed posture of his friend.

"You did upset quite a few of the Admiralty. A lot of senior officers had a finger in that pie."

"I meant to upset them, Bones. They had no right to spend the lives of my crew so casually. They didn't even get their basic research accurate, and not one of those senior officers noticed."

"The first time we step out of line..." McCoy warned.

"Inaccurate, Doctor. The first time we step out of line and fail," announced Spock.

McCoy leaned over the back of the couch. "And you think that we won't? Five years is a long time, Spock."

"Then why are you coming with us?" challenged Spock, opening his eyes and peering up at McCoy's face suspended above him.

"What? Ah! Ah mean! Hell!" McCoy spluttered.

"A reply remarkable for its lack of logic and coherence."

"While you're trying to formulate a coherent answer, Bones, why not give me that power cell and I'll go and make some more hot chocolate. I take it you do intend to stay?"

"Do Ah have any choice?"

An eyebrow curved and Spock started, in a voice loaded with sarcasm, "Certainly, Doctor. As a Human decreed sane by standard tests for your species..."

Kirk grabbed the cell and fled into the kitchen before he betrayed his amusement. Leaning dizzily against the wall he listened as McCoy's voice peaked into the soprano range. Spock, it seemed, was quite able to hold his own against McCoy when it came to teasing.

As the verbal battle raged on in the living room Kirk made the chocolate and considered his past, present and future.

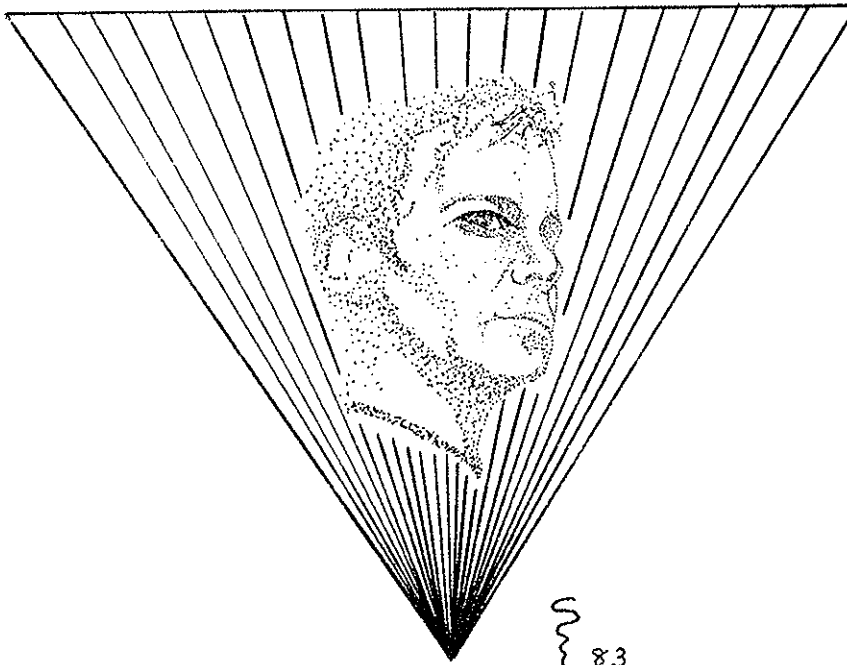
It was 3.20 in the morning. It was snowing. He was stranded in a cabin with a slightly inebriated Georgia doctor and a Vulcan with a warped sense of humour, both of whom were his friends. He had managed to get two-thirds of the Admiralty annoyed at them all, and the said senior officers would all now be watching them like hawks, waiting to descend from a great height at the first hint of a mistake.

A smile, crooked and gleeful, spread across his face.

"Hey, Pa!" he called softly. "I made the right decision. Didn't I?"

There was no answer from the empty kitchen, but it seemed to him that he'd been heard. He carried the chocolate into the firelit arena, ready to take sides, argue or arbitrate as the mood or whim took him. He'd never felt so good about anything in his entire life.

No matter what the Admiralty chose to do, the next five years were going to be fun.



THE PIRATE QUEEN

by

Karina Lumbert

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8752.2

"... and are returning to our original mission of patrolling this sector for pirates. There have been several reports of them in this sector - in fact, a number of Vulcan ships have been hit - but thus far we have seen none. The emergency on Cirrus III has taken us five light years off course, so we are proceeding at warp five with scanners at maximum range in order to..."

"Captain," Sulu interrupted, "Romulan ship, directly ahead, but at extreme range. It's running with shields down; I don't think it's seen us."

Romulan? No Romulan ship would be this deep in Federation territory, unless...

"Put it on visual, Mr. Sulu. Sound Red Alert." Kirk smiled tightly. "I believe we've found our pirates."

They caught the ship unprepared.

"It would seem the ship had access to flight records for this area, and thus was not expecting us here," Spock hypothesized as they caught the surprised ship in a tractor beam.

The ship in turn held a few surprises for the Enterprise. It was a converted Romulan scout ship; painted black, it boasted a skull and crossbones on its belly; 'ALIAS' was written on its side in blood red letters. The crew, a ragtag bunch from all over the galaxy, looked typical, but their Captain was a sight. She was dressed like a pirate from Kirk's antique books, complete with cape. Her coppery-black hair was accented by the Captain's hat from the luxury liner Antaris, which perched crookedly over one pointed ear. She scowled slightly through the viewscreen at her captors, and spoke in an Old Earth accent.

"I be Captain Tequila of the pirate ship Alias. Avast, ye scurvy dogs! Unhand me ship!"

Fighting surprise, Kirk responded. "This is Capt-- "

"I know who ye be, Captain Kirk of the mighty Enterprise."

"Then you also realise that you have violated Federation - "

But Tequila was not listening. Instead she grinned slightly, cocked a fine brow, and winked at someone behind him. He turned just in time to see Spock return the gesture.

"Hear me, Captain Kirk," Tequila then demanded. "I give ye thirty seconds. If ye do not unhand me ship, I shall strike ye such a blow as ye shan't recover from for weeks!"

Kirk shook his head. In thirty seconds she'd insulted, ignored, flirted with, and now threatened her captors. The woman had guts. Managing his most charming smile he asked, "And what are you going to do?"

To everyone's amusement and his irritation, she mimicked the gesture perfectly. "Be ye stubborn another twenty seconds, and find out."

The screen went blank.

"Sir," Chekov asked, "should I raise the deflector shields?"

That would mean releasing the tractor beam. "No. Under no circumstances are you to release that ship. She's bluffing."

"I would not be so sure, Captain," Spock intervened. "It would be more logical to - "

"We are not releasing that ship, Mr. Spock."

"As you wish, Captain, but - "

"Sir!" Chekov interrupted. "The Alias is engaging a collision course. Warp one and increasing... Ten kilometers... Warp three... Hang on!"

But the collision never occurred. At the last minute the Alias changed course, just missing the bridge and overloading the tractor beam. It snapped, but not before sending the Enterprise into somersaults.

The pirate ship Alias made a graceful victory roll before disappearing into space.

Tequila's trick had wreaked enough havoc on the Enterprise to keep the crew busy until shift change. Now Spock walked to his quarters, lengthening his stride just enough to move quickly without looking hurried. He wished to meditate.

There was something familiar about T'Kila, about the wink. He knew the wink was a signal, and 'Kila' - an alias, just as the word meant in Vulcan. And she: someone from his past, from before Genesis - long before. Why had he not been told of her? And what was the signal? Everyone thought he'd been flirting. Until he had more information he would let them believe that.

"Oh, Mr. Spo-ock."

Then again...

Spock turned to face Dr. McCoy and the Captain. Kirk looked sour, but the doctor was grinning from ear to ear as he passed his scanner over Spock.

"Well, he's medically sound, Jim."

"Is there any reason to doubt my health, Doctor?" Although he anticipated the answer he kept up the act in an effort to lighten the Captain's mood.

"Well, when you start flirting..."

Kirk was not amused. Instead he handed Spock a communique from Starfleet.

To: Captain Kirk From: Commander Finnigan

Re: Escape of Alias

Well, Jim old boy, I always knew you'd meet your match! Just like a plebe to lose a pirate. You'll have to tell me all about it, you scurvy dog.

Just be glad she didn't make you walk the plank!

"Well?" Kirk prodded.

"Obviously she couldn't find a plank, Captain."

Kirk's eyes narrowed. "You are confined to quarters, Mister, until you explain yourself."

"Yes, Captain." Spock turned to his quarters, filled with a sense of deja-vu. Why did he believe that this was not the first time T'Kila had got him sent to his room?

The memories came quickly as he meditated in his hot, dry quarters. He relaxed into them, and suddenly he was seven years old, playing pirate on the roof of the Vulcan Academy...

T'Ren - alias T'Kila - had just escaped Spock's patrol ship, using the same trick she would use on Kirk years later, and was showing Spock how it worked. She pointed to a diagram and scribbled more figures.

"Here's the point of overload..."

"So all I had to do was deactivate the tractor beam just before that point, and reactivate it just after."

T'Ren nodded. "Next time, you're the pirate. Feel better?"

Spock stretched out under the Vulcan sun. His head had stopped pounding, and he felt relaxed to the point of sleepiness. "Much better," he murmured.

"I told you the best cure for a nasty mind meld was to concentrate on something else."

"Nasty?" Spock asked with a cocked brow.

"Can you think of a better term for T'Pring that won't get our mouths washed out with soap?"

"My father would wash my mouth out for saying 'nasty'. Mother's shown him it's an effective deterrent." Spock sat up, wrapped his arms about his knees, and regarded the mountains before him. "Father knows what T'Pring and I think about each other. Why did he have us bond?" he wondered for the 2,598th time.

T'Ren sat in front of him, facing him, and mimicked his

position. "Your father is shrewd. He knows T'Pring's prejudices and her strength of will. He knows that she will not tolerate the slightest emotion from you. In his mind she is the most logical choice because she will make you his kind of Vulcan. He wants you to reject emotion altogether. And that's illogical. It's illogical for any Vulcan, and it's especially illogical for you. There's a lot to be gained from certain emotions. It's a waste of potential for you, a criminal waste. You know what else is a waste?"

"What?" Spock knew there was no way to stop her when she was on her soapbox.

"Your wanting to spend the rest of your life in research at the Vulcan Academy."

"But it's the best research facility in the Federation."

"Granted. But do you really want to spend all your life studying the same thing? You'll quickly become unchallenged."

"Should I be an espionage agent, like you plan to be, then?"

"Of course not. But you shouldn't limit yourself to Vulcan, and you know it. And don't concern yourself with T'Pring," she cut off his next argument. "You'll never be life-mates."

Spock didn't ask how she knew; she had an inexplicable way of knowing future events. "T'Ren, if I don't have a life-mate, I'll die," he said quietly.

T'Ren stared past him, concentrating. "No. I don't know why or how, but you won't die of that. But you'll forget me."

"I'll never forget you."

"Yes, you will. But when the time is ripe I'll find you and make you remember." She rocked slightly. "You shall die your father's son, and sleep a cold sleep, and you'll forget. But you will awake, Spock, and be whole. And I shall send you a signal, and you shall remember..."

Suddenly she blinked, and turned her attention back to Spock. "But that is years in the future. Until then, we are friends."

Memories moved more quickly now, without assimilating. They did remain friends, always together until their second year at the Vulcan Academy. T'Ren had begun to speak openly on her philosophy of 'selective emotion'. Her logic was thorough and exact. In fact, it was too good. Her following grew, and the Vulcan Council, sensing danger, ordered her to cease her teaching. She not only refused, but redoubled her efforts, until the Council exiled her from Vulcan.

The pain of her leaving was so great that he buried her memory and adopted his father's logic. But he saw that she was right about one thing: he did not want to remain on Vulcan. Against his father's wishes he turned down a prestigious position at the Vulcan Academy to teach at Starfleet Academy on Earth. There he met Pike, and became a Starfleet officer... then came Kirk...

"Mr. Spock, please report to the bridge. Mr. Spock - "

"Spock here. Acknowledged, Lieutenant." He moved quickly from the room, leaving memories behind.

Kirk tugged at his collar, more annoyed at being at the Starbase gathering than at the constricting uniform. Not that he minded a party, but *Finnegan's*? It had been a month since the pirate incident, but it was still a sore spot that Finnegan loved to press. At least he had his officers to protect him.

A gay, flowing melody distracted his thoughts, and he turned towards the piano, where a Vulcan sang a flighty Delian melody. She was as lovely as the music. Her long black hair, touched with red, accented her twilight-blue eyes. The sparkle in those eyes matched the slight elfin grin. There was something familiar about that grin...

Kirk chuckled and shook his head. At Spock's inquisitive look he said, "I must be getting paranoid, thinking every pointed eared woman is the Pirate Queen."

"Well, Jim boy! Blow me down!" Finnegan clapped him roughly on the shoulder. "We're having a special viewing of the ship's log of your pirate adventure. Come along, Jim boy - your audience awaits!" He dragged a helpless Kirk away.

Scott and McCoy shrugged at their Captain's pleading look, while the others tried not to laugh outright. Spock left them for the piano, where the audience stood entranced by the song, except for the Delians, who fell over each other laughing as the Vulcan flew into the last verse of the bawdy Delian drinking song. As Spock listened the memories finally came together.

T'Ren, the Pirate Queen. Kirk was right.

"Of course he was," T'Ren answered in Vulcan.

Spock started. He hadn't noticed that she'd stopped playing, nor had he expected her to speak to him.

"You can answer, Spock. My exile has been lifted." She examined her nails. "In gratitude for a favour, shall we say?"

"Certainly. It would seem you fulfilled your childhood ambition, then." Her presence inspired a small, unVulcan smile.

"I always keep my promises." She returned the smile as she glanced towards Finnegan, who guffawed loudly and thumped Kirk's back as he 'coaxed' him into telling another group about 'the one that got away'.

"All but your latest promise," Spock replied. "The Enterprise recovered in 7.53 hours."

"Who was speaking of the Enterprise?" T'Ren asked in her most innocent voice. She turned towards Kirk, who fought to be charming while he was harassed by guests. "My blow was to the Captain's pride."



LOVE-HATE

by

Sandy Catchick

Commander Spock did not need recourse to Vulcan touch telepathy to become immediately aware of the prevailing air of excitement as he opened the door to the main rec room. The tension was palpable, and the Captain, sitting with Dr. McCoy at a table near the food synthesisers, wore such a boyish look of expectancy and delight that Spock did a mental double-take before moving to join them. The resultant hesitation in his measured stride was so minute as to be unnoticeable, but by the time he reached their table he had considered and rejected a multitude of possible reasons for such behaviour. A birthday, Christmas, or some other Human festival, or an announcement of R&R on a pleasure planet of which he was unaware? Although these were matters of indifference to him personally he had learned that they were important to Humans, and must be understood and as far as possible predicted. The efficient running of the Enterprise, if not his own sanity, depended on it.

By the time he reached their table Spock had concluded that there was nothing he had forgotten. He therefore seated himself next to the Captain and raised an eyebrow in query, aware that the doctor was bursting to tell him what was up and that he therefore did not need to ask.

"Guess what?" asked McCoy, before Spock had lowered himself into his seat.

"Vulcans do not indulge in guesswork, Doctor," replied Spock.

McCoy continued as though the Vulcan had not spoken at all. "Admiral Chance is coming aboard the Enterprise at Starbase 6 to carry out a survey on crew morale, and he'll be staying with us for four weeks!"

Spock, who made it his business to be intimately aware of what was going on in Starfleet, and particularly aboard the Enterprise, was rather surprised that he was not already aware of this fact. He checked all communications to and from the Enterprise, and knew most things happening on board. This was part of his duty as First Officer, and duty was very important to him.

"I regret I was not aware of the Admiral's visit, Captain, or I would have advised you," Spock said, turning to face Kirk.

"It's okay, Spock," replied the Captain. "There's been nothing official about the visit yet, so you could not have known. I got the information in a personal message from Admiral Chance. Bill and I became friends when he gave a lecture to our class in my Academy days. He found my question worth following up after the lecture, and we've kept in touch ever since. Bill was one of the first to congratulate me when I got the captaincy of the Enterprise."

Kirk saw the Vulcan relax immediately, although there was no obvious movement in his facial muscles. The Captain knew his First

Officer almost as well as he knew himself. Spock on first sight gave the impression of being stone-faced, but Jim Kirk had got to know the man behind the mask, and in so doing could read the small signs which really spoke volumes. The Vulcan was a lot more complex than he at first appeared, and the Captain and his First Officer were the very best of friends. They had risked their lives for each other in the past, and would be willing to do so again.

"I'm really looking forward to seeing Bill again," said Kirk. "It's been at least five years since we last saw each other."

The first indication that all would not go well came when the honour guard lined up to meet the Admiral in the Enterprise's transporter room. Transporter Chief Kyle, Chief Engineer Lieutenant-Commander Scott, the ship's Chief Surgeon Dr. McCoy and the First Officer, Commander Spock, all flanked Captain Kirk as the Admiral was piped on board. Each was introduced in turn and each received a nod and a handshake, until it was Commander Spock's turn. Most Humans were aware of Vulcans' dislike of personal contact which, being touch telepaths, pushed at their mental barriers. It was therefore not surprising that the Admiral did not offer to shake Spock's hand. What was surprising, however, was that the Admiral did not even nod or acknowledge Spock's presence. In fact, he turned towards Spock with a look of deep-seated hatred in his eyes before swinging immediately on to the Captain, recovering himself and saying, "On the whole you have a fine complement of officers, Jim. I am looking forward to meeting them all in turn for my survey. I am sure we will have a lot to discuss."

Spock could not have failed to notice the Admiral's reaction, but he gave no sign of it. Captain Kirk decided to take his cue from the Vulcan, for the time being at least, and let the matter ride. Once before Spock had been ignored by a visiting dignitary, his own father, Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan. He had shown no sign of being upset on that occasion either, but it had been a trip and a half for the Enterprise, and both Kirk's and Spock's lives had been at risk before that mission had been completed.

Why did Kirk get that same feeling now, that things were seriously wrong? He shook his head, as though that would shake him out of his sense of foreboding, but when he led the Admiral away towards the guest quarters it was still with a sinking feeling in his heart.

McCoy was not so delicate as the Captain. "What was that all about?" he asked Spock without preamble.

Spock did not attempt to misunderstand the doctor when he responded without inflection, "I regret I have no idea, Doctor."

McCoy was plagued with a sense of foreboding at least the equal of the Captain's as the Vulcan turned abruptly and left the transporter room and its silent row of officers. Silence was not the norm among the Enterprise's officers, and they exchanged worried glances before turning to their own duties. *What a way to start conducting a survey of crew morale!* was McCoy's thought as he returned to sickbay.

Captain Kirk spent the evening with the Admiral, and did not

broach the subject of Commander Spock until they had exchanged news, caught up on the five years since they had last met, and settled down with a bottle of Saurian brandy between them.

Finally Kirk could hold back no longer and asked the Admiral straight out, "Bill, when you arrived this afternoon and met my officers, it seemed to me that you passed over my First Officer, Commander Spock. Do you know him from a previous assignment?"

Kirk was surprised at the vehemence of the Admiral's response. "Know him, Jim? What makes you think that anyone could know a Vulcan?"

Alarm bells went off in Kirk's head as he said very quietly, "I know him, Bill. He's the best First Officer in the Fleet, and he is my personal friend."

The Admiral was astounded. "Vulcans don't make friends, Jim. That's part of the reason I chose the Enterprise for my survey. Vulcans normally serve aboard all-Vulcan vessels, and I wanted to find out what happens to crew morale when they serve with Humans. It must be pretty hard to serve under a walking computer."

How many times had McCoy called Spock a walking computer to his face? Kirk wondered. It had always been a part of their verbal sparring. He had never heard the term applied literally before, and he found it hard to suppress a shudder at the thought. He came to Spock's defence immediately.

"Why not give it some time until you get to know him, Bill? I think you'll find he's far more than just a walking computer. He may have a brain like a rapier, and he may not react like a Human, but you wouldn't expect him to. I have every confidence in him. I think you'll find that the crew do, too."

The Admiral snorted at the idea, but replied, "We'll see, Jim. I don't think the Vulcan was born who could understand the real meaning of... friendship... and the interdependence between officers that is so necessary to the efficient running of a Starship. They don't even understand humour."

Why had the Admiral hesitated over the word 'friendship'? Kirk wondered.

But the the Admiral didn't give him time to consider the matter further. He ended their evening abruptly, dismissing Kirk with an "I'm tired now, Jim. I'd better turn in. You'll get a full report when I have finished interviewing everyone and have assimilated the findings."

Kirk left unsaid the retort that sprang to his lips, but his mind was in turmoil as he returned to his own cabin. He could visualise the Vulcan in the cabin next door, and debated whether to talk to him about it. In the end he decided to leave things for the time being.

In his own quarters Spock's exceptional hearing picked up the hesitation in the Captain's footsteps as Kirk walked by his door, and understood the reason for it. Although Spock himself had attempted his regular meditation before the firepot, he had found the deep state of meditation had eluded him, his mind always returning to the

personal hatred he had seen on the Admiral's face. Spock understood Humans enough to know that they feared what they did not understand, and he had come to terms with being different and being feared, hated, or the centre of Human jokes because he was a Vulcan - a prejudice that still existed in some quarters, in spite of spaceflight capability. The Enterprise's first encounter with the Romulans had highlighted this for him. This time it was different, because Spock sensed a *personal* hatred, and not just a hatred for Vulcans, which was illogical in a man he did not know.

Spock finally came to a decision of his own, one he did not take lightly. His honour as a Vulcan fought with his duty as First officer of the Enterprise, and the former won out. He had to know if he had unknowingly done something to spark off the Admiral's hatred. He could see only one way of checking on that. He gave up his attempt at meditation and turned to his computer terminal. Spock's movements were firm as his hands flew harmoniously over the keys, forcing the machine to provide him with the information he sought. He broke through Starfleet security codes as though they did not exist - an ability that had worried his Captain on one previous occasion when Vulcan honour had also been at stake. Within an hour he had what he wanted - the reason for the Admiral's behaviour.

Spock studied the screen before him for a long minute, memorising every detail before deleting it and all record of his access. When he returned to his meditation Spock understood. Further, he knew that his understanding came from his Human half, from the things he had learned from Jim Kirk and Dr. McCoy. The Admiral's reactions were not logical, but they were Humanly predictable. Spock had heard of the love-hate relationship before, but he had never seen it in practice. Now he could see it for himself. The scientist in him decided to observe it; the Human in him understood and made allowances for it; and the Vulcan in him gave him the capacity to absorb it without retaliation, and the patience to wait. His understanding and acceptance made him vulnerable, but he could react to the Admiral in no other way and still be Spock.

Now that Spock did not believe his personal honour to be at stake mediation came easily. It was the Admiral who faced a dilemma, and one that Spock did not wish to add to. He regretted that the Admiral, being Human, was unable to use Vulcan logic or patience to help him resolve his dilemma. The Human would have to work things out in his own way.

Unfortunately for Spock, the Admiral's reactions were far more extreme than he could ever have predicted from his own observation of Human behaviour. That knowledge would not have changed Spock's decision, and it was therefore a blessing that Spock did not predict or dwell on the Admiral's actions.

The next morning the Admiral came onto the bridge and enlisted the help of the Captain's personal yeoman, Janice Rand, to set up meetings with all the bridge officers and with specific named members of the crew. She was surprised that the list was hand-written, as the computer normally printed out random selections for statistical tests such as the one on crew morale. She said hesitantly,

"Admiral, our computer could print out a randomly selected list of crewmen and officers for you to interview without your having to hand-write them, if that would help."

The Admiral responded, "Yeoman Rand, please get on and arrange the interviews I have requested. There is nothing random in my selection. I have chosen the people I wish to see with care, and I do not intend to trust anything to the Enterprise's computers. They could quite easily be tampered with."

The whole bridge crew overheard the rather loud remark, and there were one or two glances towards Spock's computer station. Spock continued with his work without any indication that he had heard.

Just then the Captain came onto the bridge. He knew instantly that something important had just happened, but wrongly assumed that it was his yeoman who was at the centre of the problem.

"Is everything all right, Bill?" he asked. Catching Rand's eye and winking at her he added, "You'll have to give Janice a while to get used to your way of operation, but she's an excellent yeoman. I can vouch for that personally."

"Janice is doing just fine," said the Admiral. "I'm looking forward to starting the interviews as soon as possible. I see Lieutenant Uhura is just about to go off duty. Perhaps I could start with her, and that would give Janice time to arrange the rest of the interviews for me?"

"By all means, if the Lieutenant is happy," responded Kirk.

Uhura confirmed that she was ready, and the Admiral asked to see her in Briefing Room 3 in half an hour's time. He then left the bridge.

As soon as Chase left Spock came up to Kirk and asked if he could see him privately. Kirk, somehow not at all surprised, escorted his First Officer off the bridge and into the turbolift, heading for his quarters. The lift discharged them into the corridor nearby, and Kirk led the way to his cabin without a word.

"Captain," Spock began without preamble, "the Admiral is worried that the computers on board the Enterprise may have been tampered with." Before Kirk could interrupt he went on, "I must advise you that I have not and would not tamper with the Enterprise's computers. I have, however, used them to access confidential information without the necessary Starfleet security clearance. I therefore present myself to you as prescribed under the Starfleet manual, Section C, Paragraph..."

"Hold on a minute, Spock!" interrupted Kirk. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"I thought I had made myself plain, Captain," replied Spock. "I have made unauthorised use of the ship's computers and..."

"Why?" interrupted Kirk.

He was met by silence.

Kirk tried another tack. "What exactly have you done to the computers?"

"Nothing, Captain," responded the First Officer. "I have merely used them to look at classified information."

"What classified information?" asked Kirk in exasperation.

"I regret I cannot answer that, Captain, but it will go no further than my own reading of it."

The Captain stared at him for a long moment before suddenly being enlightened by one of his intuitive guesses. "You've looked at Admiral Chance's personal file, haven't you, Spock?"

Spock nodded.

"And you know what he's after, don't you?"

Spock nodded again.

"And you're not going to tell me?"

"Affirmative, Captain. I could not make you a party to my transgressions. I am willing to take any consequences of my actions."

"There will be no consequences, Spock. I'm just a little intrigued as to what the Admiral intends myself. You've reported your actions to me and in accordance with regulations and my prerogative as Captain of the Enterprise I'm going to forget we ever had this conversation."

"As you wish, Captain," replied Spock, nodding politely before turning and heading calmly for the door.

Well, how about that? thought Kirk, and a slight grin remained on his face as he left for the bridge. He would have loved to know what his First Officer had found out, but knew it would be a waste of time to pursue the subject with Spock. It would be easier to tackle a clam.

By the time Kirk returned to the bridge Spock was back at his station and Uhura's replacement was at the communications console. Kirk took his seat and turned his mind to the general running of his ship.

In the meantime the Admiral had settled himself in the briefing room and looked over his report on Uhura in preparation for their interview. When she knocked and he bade her enter, he was surprised to see her wearing a long flowing dress, and not her usual red uniform. She saw his look, and spoke without being asked.

"I am off duty, Admiral, and I thought the point was to discuss crew morale."

The Admiral nodded, discomfited in spite of himself. He soon got down to details, however, and found that Uhura was very fond of the Enterprise, and felt herself privileged to be one of her bridge officers. He then led her on to talking about relationships with the rest of the crew. She was very enthusiastic about the whole crew, and said they were like one big happy family. Having confirmed that her remarks would not be used against her in any way, she added that she nevertheless thought of the male members of the crew on occasion as a group of little boys that she had to look after.

The Admiral used this as an opening for the discussion he really

wished to hold. "Do you also find Mr. Spock like a little boy, Miss Uhura?" he asked, sure in his own mind of the answer. He was astonished by her reply, although it was preceded by a little giggle.

"The Captain and Mr. Spock between them are the naughtiest little boys of the lot, although neither of them would ever admit it. They have to keep up their appearances in order to command respect."

"Do you have any difficulty in communicating with Mr. Spock in any way, or should I say, does his being a Vulcan cause you any problems?"

"Why do you ask?" she responded, suddenly remembering the Admiral's remarks about tampered computers, and no longer taking the subject so lightly.

"Crew morale depends on the relationship between the officers and crew of a Starship, and I am interested in the effects of having a Vulcan officer on board."

"Oh," she replied, "Mr. Spock is the best First Officer I have ever served with. I would trust him with my life and the lives of the whole crew. He's got us out of endless scrapes, and he's always there with his calm voice of control when things go wrong. He's not thinking of leaving the Enterprise, is he?" she continued rather worriedly. "We really need him, you know. The Captain needs him, and even Dr. McCoy would miss his regular arguments with him."

The Admiral noted that final remark and jotted down the one word 'McCoy' on his pad. He continued, "No, he's not thinking of leaving, Miss Uhura. I am merely finding out the things that cause difficulties when Vulcans serve with Humans. Perhaps you can think of some difficulties?" he prompted.

She considered the question before replying. "I can't think of any difficulties, except the initial breaking-in ones between any two people who meet for the first time. You have to get to understand anyone when you meet them, and I guess with Mr. Spock being Vulcan there are one or two extra things to get to understand."

When pushed she elucidated by explaining that there were things she had needed to know about Vulcans, their planet, and their way of life, and things Spock had needed to know about Humans so that they understood each other. The example she gave was of the time she began to feel too much a part of her communications console, and asked Mr. Spock jokingly why he didn't tell her she was an attractive young lady, or ask her if she had ever been in love. She had asked him how his planet looked on a lazy evening when the moon was full. His response had been, 'Vulcan has no moon, Miss Uhura.' In view of his total lack of romanticism she had had to reply that she was not surprised.

She added, "Sometimes Mr. Spock is such a part of the Enterprise that you forget that he comes from a different planet. If anything," she ended, "I think it is we who are unfair to him. We expect him to adapt to our ways, and he nearly always complies, but we make so little allowance for how he thinks or how he feels."

The Admiral said that he understood that Vulcans had no feelings, and Uhura was quick to reply.

"You're wrong, Admiral. They do have feelings. They just don't

show them as readily as Humans. It is sometimes painful for Mr. Spock to show how he feels, particularly if the bridge officers are watching, but I have known him long enough to know that he feels deeply. He is always the first to reach me if I have been hurt or thrown out of my seat by a storm or a battle. He will help me up and make sure I'm all right, and then he'll be so embarrassed about doing so that he'll get back in his Vulcan mask and pretend that he's concentrating solely on his sensors. You see, Admiral, he has learned to adapt to us, and we have learned to adapt to him. It really works very well."

This was not what the Admiral had wished to hear, and he was quick to terminate the interview, turning his mind to his one note - 'McCoy'.

The Admiral's timing was perfect. He entered sickbay just as McCoy could be heard muttering, "That damned Vulcan! One of these days..."

"What's the problem?" asked Admiral Chance as he approached McCoy.

"Oh," said McCoy, still mad at the Vulcan, "it's Spock again. Him and his medical! He gives me the runaround every time I want to examine him. And I've just calibrated all the equipment especially for him! I don't know how that crazy patchwork physiology of his keeps up with his antics. Sometimes he thinks he's the doctor and I'm just here for show. He's just told me my medical examination is superfluous, and as it's not in the regulations he sees no reason to comply with my request. Well, he may not think so, but I've got a very good reason for examining him!"

"Tell me more about Mr. Spock and yourself," prompted the Admiral.

McCoy took a deep breath, ready to launch into one of his tirades against the Vulcan, and then paused, suddenly remembering the Admiral's reaction in the transporter room just after he had beamed on board. McCoy changed his mind, and let out a long sigh before speaking.

"Well, it's not as bad as it sounds, really, Admiral. It's just that Spock being half Vulcan and half Human he's rather difficult to keep track of medically, as he's unique. He's so rarely ill, and he doesn't like medical examinations, so I always have to fight to get him to come down for a check-up. Yet because he is unique I... well... I guess you could say I worry about him," he finished lamely. "Take his blood, for example," McCoy continued. "That has Human elements in it. Or take his internal organs - his heart is where the liver should be in a Human, but there are other organs that are quite Human. It's like trying to analyse a whole new species, only Spock doesn't cooperate in the examination."

"Surely Captain Kirk insists that he cooperate?" asked the Admiral.

"Oh, the Captain's mostly on my side, but Spock has the most wonderful excuses."

The Admiral was really interested, and leaned forward, demanding, "Give me an example, Doctor."

McCoy complied. "Last time I asked him to report for a medical at a precise time, he told me he couldn't. When I pressed him on the matter he told me he was still on duty on the bridge for another 5.6 minutes, and therefore could not comply with my request. Well, if that's not scraping the bottom of the barrel!"

Admiral Chance was rather taken aback. He tried to change the subject slightly. "I understand you have quite a few arguments with the First Officer."

"Indeed I do," replied McCoy. "Daily! Someone's got to get through that thick Vulcan skin and that insufferable facade of his, and I guess I just feel it's my job to do it. It's nice just once in a while to show him that there's more to life than logic."

"Then would you say working with a Vulcan does not help crew morale?" said the Admiral, trying to put words in the doctor's mouth.

"What on earth gave you that idea?" responded McCoy. "I may argue with Spock daily, Admiral, but that's a sign of the high regard in which I hold him. His logic may be insufferable on occasion, and he may be rather too literal-minded on occasion too, but his good points far outweigh the bad ones, and I only tease him because of the satisfaction I get out of it. Having him on board is the best medicine for crew morale I could prescribe, because it's the best medicine for the Captain's morale, and the two are interdependent. Without Spock both the Captain and this ship would suffer. I may argue with him, but I'd argue a damn sight more about losing him. If you want that in writing I'll give it to you! Further, his being a Vulcan is kind of incidental, isn't it? We're not considering any old Vulcan here, we're considering Mr. Spock. He's unique. He's brilliant at his job, he's loyal, and he's part of the Enterprise family." The doctor warmed to his subject. "If you want a report on crew morale and how Spock affects it, you could say that Spock has a positive influence on crew morale. He has saved the Captain and crew from death or worse on innumerable occasions, and for that it's a small price to pay recalibrating my machines to examine him!"

Yet again the Admiral was surprised. "But I thought you and the First Officer didn't get on too well, and that you felt it was because he was a Vulcan."

McCoy was surprised in turn. "The trouble with Spock is that he's neither totally Vulcan nor totally Human. He likes to be thought of as a Vulcan, and therefore suppresses his Human instincts. I guess I just like to tease him by reminding him he still has them."

"You mean he has feelings because he's half Human, but a true Vulcan would not?"

"Not at all," replied McCoy. "His father is a full Vulcan, yet had feelings enough to marry an Earthwoman. The problems Spock faces are that he stands astride two cultures, two philosophies, and even two biologies. Sometimes it takes someone outside himself to clarify things for him. His Vulcan and Human parents merely had to come to terms with each other; Spock has to come to terms with himself as well."

McCoy was too close to the mark for Admiral Chance. He didn't like where this conversation was leading.

McCoy was beginning to have some questions of his own as he

rightly read the reaction to his last response in the Admiral's eyes. The psychiatrist in him was alerted and he asked, "Tell me, Admiral, do you know any Vulcans apart from Spock?"

The Admiral's response was not exactly polite. "Doctor, that is none of your business. I am not one of your patients, nor do I intend to become one. I'll see myself out." He left for the rec room, and decided to seek a bite of lunch.

McCoy thought for a while, and then pressed a button.

"Bridge. Kirk here," was the immediate response.

"Jim, can I have a word with you? The Admiral has just left me in sickbay, and I think we could have a problem."

"On my way," replied Kirk, wondering if his whole command crew was facing problems with the Admiral.

Kirk made his way slowly from the turbolift to sickbay where McCoy was waiting impatiently. McCoy didn't even give him time to settle down in the proffered seat before launching into an explanation of his worries.

"Jim, Admiral Chance just left here. He took me through a load of questions which I swear were designed to find fault with Spock. My instincts tell me he's out to get Spock, and because he's a Vulcan. It doesn't make sense, but something tells me he's obsessed with the matter, and this idea of testing crew morale is just a cover."

Kirk's response surprised the doctor. "Bones, I think you're right. But there's nothing I can do about it at the moment. Besides, Spock knows what he's after."

"What!"

"He didn't admit to anything, of course - well, you know Spock - but he indicated that he knew."

"Why didn't you force him to tell you?" asked McCoy worriedly.

"Come on, Bones," responded Kirk. "You know as well as I do how far that would have got me. In my opinion we'll just have to wait and see how things develop. But I'll take action if and when it becomes necessary. I'd appreciate a medical report on the Admiral from you. Will that fit the bill as far as you're concerned?"

McCoy sounded depressed. "I don't know, Jim. There's something unhealthy about this. But I guess if Spock knows what it's about and he's willing to wait, then we should wait. My medical report may not be much help. It's not always easy to prove prejudice, and that's what I think this is. Would you mind if I questioned Spock about it too?"

Kirk said that would get the doctor nowhere, but agreed to let him try. Both were thoughtful as they returned to their respective duties.

Meanwhile Admiral Chance had made his way to the main rec room, where Janice Rand managed to catch up with him. She gave him a list

of interviews that she had arranged, and was a little annoyed when he said he'd already seen Dr. McCoy. However, she made no comment and left him with a tightly packed schedule which started with an interview with Mr. Scott straight after lunch.

The Admiral thanked her and said she had done a good job. She had not expected to get any praise from him, but was pleased nonetheless. It wasn't every day that a yeoman got praise from a fully-fledged Admiral.

The Admiral looked around and saw a group of young officers sitting together at a table. He decided to join them. As he moved towards their table he was able to look past them, and spotted Mr. Spock sitting alone. *Typical*, he thought, but had he waited another second he would have seen Spock joined by Mr. Scott.

Chekov, Sulu and Boma were grouped in animated discussion near the food synthesisers. Sulu was saying, "You've got to handle her carefully, or she'll dump you."

He stopped talking immediately the Admiral appeared. There was a small tension-filled silence, broken finally by Admiral Chance.

"Gentlemen," he said, "don't let me spoil your fun."

Sulu grinned and said, "We were discussing Chekov's approaching test in the Enterprise's flight simulator. He's about to go through high warp speed manoeuvres as back-up helmsman, and I was giving him some advice. Last time he tried it he got thrown out of his seat and ended up crashing when he let go of the controls. He was lucky that time, as Scotty let him off with some extra test exercises. This time it will be Mr. Spock watching him, and I don't think the First Officer will be quite so understanding if he crashes again. He's too fond of the Enterprise for that."

The Admiral let that last remark flow over him. He asked Chekov, "Does it concern you, having Mr. Spock as your invigilator?"

Chekov looked glum and said, "Mr. Spock sets the highest standards, and one does not like to fail him."

"Are you scared of him?" asked the Admiral.

Chekov hesitated, and the Admiral read fear where Chekov was merely searching for the right words. Finally the Russian said, "I would not wish to let him or the Enterprise down, and I will make the best effort to do well for him."

"Mr. Spock sets very high standards," explained Sulu. "He is quite brilliant himself, and so naturally everyone wants to do well when he's in charge. He's also quite serious about things, so you feel you have to be serious too."

"Ah," said the Admiral. "So you don't behave normally when he's around. You don't joke or have a quiet chat."

"Not exactly," said Sulu. "He doesn't stop us having a joke or a chat, although he may raise his eyebrows over some of the things we say, and he doesn't laugh himself, of course. But he doesn't mind being laughed at, so in a way he does join in, although he doesn't laugh. It's just that you want to please him, so you make an extra effort if he asks you to do something, and you know he'll be ahead of you on most things, so you have to achieve a high standard yourself."

It's good to have something to aim for. I guess he really makes us reach the best standards. If you look at the test results for the Enterprise against some of the other Starships you'll see that we do very well. It's because we've got such good examples to live up to. The Captain, Mr. Spock and Mr. Scott are the best examples any junior officers could hope to have. I'd like to be a little like all of them, and I'm proud to have the chance to serve with them now."

"I agree entirely," added Boma. "My first dealings with Mr. Spock led me to believe he didn't care about us when we were stuck with the Galileo on a very hostile planet with little chance of getting off. The shuttle was overweight and could not reach escape velocity unless we removed around 300lbs in weight. Mr. Spock said that would be the equivalent of two men, and if he had to choose which ones to leave behind he would do so. I was quite rude to him about being sick of his logic, but he didn't put me on remand or even report the incident to the Captain when we returned on board - which surprised me.

"But in the end I realised he was right. As commander of our small band he had to make choices for the benefit of all of us - possibly difficult choices. I was too selfish to see that, and thought only of each individual. As it turned out, without Spock's brilliant idea to send up the equivalent of a flare, which enabled us to be rescued, we would all have died. And I learned that he was quite prepared to sacrifice himself for any one of us. In fact, it was quite funny in the end."

"It doesn't sound very funny to me," said the Admiral.

"Oh, not the event itself. That was an experience I will never forget, and we left two friends behind, killed by the hostiles. But when we returned on board it was funny. I wasn't on the bridge myself, but I heard about it from Lt. Uhura. Both Captain Kirk and the doctor thought Spock had acted emotionally in igniting our fuel as a flare when there was almost no hope of the Enterprise being in the area and seeing it. They tackled Spock about it, and tried to get him to admit to acting as a Human. But he'd have none of it. He insisted he had acted quite logically, and as the situation was plainly hopeless he had decided that something extraordinary had to be done. He wouldn't admit he had acted emotionally, and the Captain told him, 'Mr. Spock, you're a stubborn man.' You'll never believe what he replied."

"What?" asked the Admiral, intrigued in spite of himself.

Sulu, Chekov and Boma answered in chorus, "Yes, sir," and they all grinned from ear to ear.

"He didn't mind us laughing at all," remembered Chekov. "In fact, Dr. McCoy and the Captain laughed about it for weeks."

"And," added Boma, "Mr. Spock even asked me afterwards how I would have approached the problems we faced, and he was quite willing to learn from anything I had to say. He commended me for my actions on the planet, even though I thought he was more likely to reprimand me for my insolence. When I asked him about that he told me that he did not always find it easy to understand Human reactions to things, and he therefore found it quite acceptable for me not to understand Vulcan reactions. He made it quite clear he would not tolerate any insubordination, but he left me in no doubt that he held nothing against me. In fact, I put my name forward to serve in another landing party with him after that, and he put me in charge of two of

the others on the basis of my ability to cope on that first landing party with him. I'd put myself down to serve with him anytime."

"We all would," added Chekov. "The Captain and Mr. Spock are the best team anyone could serve with."

They were interrupted by Scott, who approached the Admiral. "Admiral Chance, I understand you wish to see me about crew morale. I am ready whenever you are, sir."

The Admiral nodded to the junior officers and said, "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen." As he left a cheeky Russian voice floated after him.

"The Admiral sounded just like Mr. Spock. He always says, 'If you'll excuse me, gentlemen' in that tone of voice."

Scott heard, too, and he was hard pressed not to laugh.

"Our First Officer is often the start of jokes like that, Admiral," said Scott, realising that Chance had heard and wanting to take the sting out of it. He got no reply. The Admiral seemed so serious, and for him it was not natural, as it was for the Vulcan. Scott could spend an hour with Mr. Spock in total silence, and enjoy it. He was finding it difficult to make it back to Engineering with the Admiral.

However, the Admiral was not a stupid man. His first questions to Scott were about the engines, and he therefore got the Chief Engineer's attention. Scott loved his engines, and could talk about them for hours. The Admiral began to notice that too, and decided to break in on what was becoming a monologue.

"Lieutenant-Commander Scott," he began.

"Call me Scotty, laddie, everyone else does," responded the Scot, warming to his engines and therefore also to the Admiral.

Admiral Chance was not enamoured of the term 'laddie', and certainly not when applied to himself, but he took it manfully in order to question the Engineer on his pet subject. He cleared his throat and began again.

"Scotty, you've told me how Captain Kirk allows you to keep your engines the best in the fleet. What happens when Mr. Spock is in charge as First Officer? Does he do the same?"

"Oh, aye," said Scott. "Mind you, there were one or two times I got annoyed with that Vulcan for pushing the engines too far. Sometimes he's inhuman in what he expects from my wee bairns. I remember the time we chased that asteroid at better than Warp 9, and I told that stubborn... Vulcan... that the engines would blow if he kept that up. But he had to have his way, and we lost the warp drive engines, and had to get back to the planet where the Captain had been left behind on impulse power, with that asteroid four hours behind us all the way. That was some 58 days! And what was more to the point, Spock didn't seem to feel any remorse for what he had done, although Dr. McCoy assured me he did. But then it was a command decision, and he did save the Captain in the end. He was right about that asteroid, and if Dr. McCoy had listened to him and left the planet when Spock said he should we probably wouldn't have needed to travel at Warp 9 at all. Still, all's well that ends well, and we saved the planet and the Captain, and my engines were fixed when we reached the

next Starbase."

The Admiral had just started to question Scott more closely when they were interrupted by Lt. Uhura's voice on the shipwide intercom.

"Yellow alert, yellow alert. This is not a drill. We have just picked up an emergency distress signal. Yellow alert."

The Captain's voice followed close behind. "Engineering, this is the Captain."

"Scott here," replied Mr. Scott almost immediately.

"We've just picked up an emergency distress signal, Scotty. I want Warp 9 in five minutes time. Kirk out."

Mr. Scott gave a rapid set of orders to his engineers before turning back to the Admiral. "My apologies, Admiral, but I'm sure you'll understand." He added, "When we continue this conversation I'll have to tell you about all the times Captain Kirk has pushed my engines beyond endurance too."

The Admiral found himself a 'spare part'. The thought 'Admiral Dunsel' crossed his mind, and he decided to go to the bridge - he could always say it was to observe crew morale, even if he knew it was because he wanted to know what was going on.

As the turbolift doors opened the Admiral got an impression of directed activity and no panic whatsoever. Lt. Uhura was saying, "I've got the call for you on audio now, Captain."

Spock broke in smoothly, "From Starfleet records for this quadrant, I believe it will be the USS Lourdsburg, Captain. A Class T freighter. Crew of eight."

Chekov took up the conversation. "I have her pinpointed, sair; position plotted, Captain."

"Ahead warp factor 9," said the Captain, turning to Sulu and getting the immediate repose, "Aye aye, sir."

Then the distress signal filled the bridge. No-one turned from their work, but everyone listened attentively in spite of that.

"Hello - can anyone hear us out there? This is a Federation freighter en route to Starbase 13. We've had an explosion and the engines have failed. We need rescuing. Can anyone help us?"

Uhura's hands sped over her console trying to pin down the voice. She finally managed to feed the settings into the computer and was able to relax from tracking the voice manually. She reported immediately, "I am unable to establish two-way contact, Captain. They do not appear to be receiving us."

As though to confirm her statement the disembodied voice repeated the same message. No coordinates were given.

"Keep trying," said Kirk, turning to Spock. "ETA, Spock?" he asked.

"35.24 minutes," said Spock in his usual precise manner. "They could have injured aboard, Captain," he added quietly. "Their communications officer would have given his coordinates. It could be

a trap, but sensors show no other ships in the area."

"Get Dr. McCoy and Mr. Scott and ask them to meet us in the briefing room," said Kirk, turning to Uhura again. "Perhaps you would like to join us, Admiral," he added. "I think we should use our thirty minutes wisely." He saw Spock's eyebrow rise at the imprecise nature of his comment, and forestalled a correction to 32.85 minutes by grinning happily back at the Vulcan. That got both Spock's eyebrows on the rise, and Kirk couldn't help adding, "You're becoming predictable, Mr. Spock."

"Thank you, Captain," was the reply. "It is unfortunate that Humans are rarely logical enough to be predicted." As he spoke Spock rose, belying his comment on Human unpredictability - he knew, without the order, that the Captain wanted him in the briefing room also. His long strides soon caught him up with the Captain, so that the two of them entered the turbolift together.

"You have the con, Mr. Sulu," was Kirk's parting remark.

McCoy was waiting for them in the briefing room. Kirk asked Spock to report first; he put up a schematic of the USS *Lourdsburg* and went through the information on it in detail - too much detail for McCoy. However, when Spock's voice hesitated for a fraction of a second he got McCoy's and Kirk's attention instantly. The Admiral, less attuned to Spock, did not even notice the pause.

On catching Kirk's eye Spock ended, "The cargo is listed as classified, Captain. I am unable to obtain details without security clearance from Starfleet. I should like Lt. Uhura to contact them and apprise them of the situation."

Kirk nodded his agreement and Spock turned to contact the bridge.

Scott outlined his proposals for rescue, and contingency plans for towing the freighter. They could do little else now but wait.

Spock got his reply from Lt. Uhura and turned back to the others. "The classified cargo is apparently a prototype shuttle engine, Captain. We are ordered to blow up the freighter to avoid it falling into the wrong hands if we cannot transfer the cargo on board. Identification serial numbers have been transmitted to us."

Kirk wondered why Starfleet had trusted such an important cargo to an old, unarmed freighter, but guessed it was in the hope that it would thereby go unnoticed. They would soon know if someone was after the new engine, or if the explosion had been an accident. "We'll go to red alert on approaching the freighter," he concluded.

Spock nodded and went to check the rescue apparatus while there was time. Scott and McCoy returned to their own departments to make final preparations while Kirk returned to the bridge with the Admiral.

The final approach to the freighter was tense, with the *Enterprise* ready and waiting on red alert status. They still had not established two-way communication with the freighter, and its distress signal would have continued its repetitive plea on the bridge had not Kirk asked Uhura to silence it. In view of the *Lourdsburg's* special cargo, Spock had worked out a method to send

across a line to establish communications before trying to board. He was concentrating on his scanners trying to ensure that no hostile ships were in the area, and checking on the freighter. He had already advised the Captain that there were only four life readings on board, all Human, and there appeared to be severe damage to the bridge area.

The first communication they received from the freighter, which Kirk had asked to be put on the bridge speakers, was a ragged cheer. Spock raised one eyebrow. Kirk just grinned. It was unlikely that the freighter crew would be cheering if they thought there were hostiles around.

Uhura established that four men had died in the explosion: the Captain, the First Officer, the Chief Engineer and their Communications Officer. A Petty Officer, Sean McLyntoc, was in charge. He advised that two crewmen with him were hurt, one seriously and one with minor injuries, but that a fourth crewman had been trapped on the cargo deck while trying to rescue something.

"That will be the engine, Captain. Perhaps we will be able to beam it aboard," said Spock.

"You can't do that," McLyntoc broke in immediately. "Our engines are unstable, and the whole ship could blow at any time if you transport near the cargo deck - that's just next to the engine room. It would be suicide. You'll have to abandon the cargo and our crewman. He may be dead anyway."

"We can't just leave a crew member there!" broke in McCoy, concerned himself and annoyed at the petty Officer's lack of concern.

"The crewman is alive. However, Mr. McLyntoc is correct. We cannot use the transporters, Captain, or they could set off an explosion," confirmed Spock. "It would be best if the doctor and I, accompanied by two engineers, were to effect a rescue using the shuttle. The transporters could be used to rescue the remainder of the crew from the freighter's bridge."

"I agree." McCoy's voice joined Spock's for once.

"It will take too long to organise," said Kirk. "The three of us were ready to beam across, so we'll just take the shuttle. Scotty can coordinate the beamover for the remainder of the party."

"I should like to accompany you," said the Admiral.

Spock spoke immediately. "It would be too dangerous to have all the senior officers at risk at one time, Captain."

The Admiral pursued his point. "I am here to study crew morale, and I can see no better way of studying it than under emergency conditions."

"That's settled, then," said the Captain. "Mr. Spock, you're the one person who can identify the engine and ensure it's what it's supposed to be, and hasn't been tampered with. Dr. McCoy is needed in case the crewman is injured, which seems likely."

"What about you, Jim?" queried McCoy.

"Scotty will be here to keep an eye on the Enterprise. My orders are to deal with that engine, and I can't do that from here."

Let's not waste time. Besides, I can't let the Admiral go unescorted, can I?"

Spock opened his mouth to argue, but one look at the Captain was enough to tell him he was wasting his time, so he bowed to the logic of the situation and kept his silence. McCoy scowled, but was similarly aware of the Captain's immovability on such matters. The Admiral looked like a young crewman on his first landing party - and no doubt he did not often get the chance for action these days.

Spock piloted the shuttlecraft expertly towards the Lourdsburg. They landed on the shuttledeck, which was still operative. It was impossible to reach the freighter's bridge from there, but Kirk checked back with the Enterprise on his communicator and confirmed that the three crewmen had been beamed over and were all in sickbay. Spock indicated the way they should go to reach the cargo deck, and they all followed him along the corridor. One or two areas had caved in, but by taking a short detour they reached the cargo deck without incident.

The crewman there had given up hope of rescue, and met them with an expression of utter disbelief. McCoy took out his scanner immediately, but found to his delight that the man was suffering from shock and bruises, but nothing serious. On questioning him, they found that his name was Bob Mark, and he had been left in charge of the engine. He was surprised that they knew about it, but looking at the Admiral and the Captain, he decided that it was safe to tell them about it.

"I was put in charge of the safety of the prototype, sir," he explained. "It's packed in a crate over there. It will take two or three of us to get it shifted, though. It's pretty heavy."

Spock went over to have a look, inspecting the engine and ensuring it was what it was supposed to be. "Everything is in order, and I believe that with your assistance we could manage it, Captain."

Kirk joined him and they had a go at lifting it. It would be a slow job, but not impossible. Bob Mark insisted that he could help, and he joined them. McCoy led the way back to the shuttle, followed by Kirk and Mark holding one end of the crate and Spock the other. Admiral Chance took up the rear position.

They were almost back to the shuttlecraft when there was the sound of another explosion, and the walls started to cave in around them. Spock thought immediately of the engine and their orders to protect or destroy it. He didn't have time to complete his thoughts, for the wall caved in between them, hitting the edge of the crate and forcing Kirk and Mark to jump for their lives.

When the sound of falling debris and metal supports had died down Spock found himself with the Admiral and the crate on one side of the rubble, completely cut off. Kirk, McCoy and Mark were on the other side. What Spock didn't know was that they were cut off completely, both from Spock and the shuttle, as debris had fallen on both sides, trapping them in the middle.

Spock immediately turned to his communicator and tried to raise the Enterprise. There was no response. He ascertained that it had been damaged for longer range contact, but believed it could be fixed to operate over a local range. After he had spent a little time

dismantling it and putting it back together again McCoy's voice suddenly came through.

"Hello, is anyone out there? This is McCoy. Can you hear me?"

After Spock's, "Affirmative, Doctor. This is Spock", McCoy came back immediately to say, "Spock! I've been trying to raise the Enterprise for ages. This is the only communicator that isn't totally destroyed, and when I couldn't raise anyone I thought I was completely cut off. Thank God you're all right."

Spock replied, "I understood that you consider me to be closer to the devil, Doctor." Without waiting for a rejoinder he added, "Are the Captain and Mr. Mark with you?"

McCoy's reply put an end to any attempts to lighten the atmosphere. "Both the Captain and Mr. Mark have been hit by falling debris, and are unconscious. We're completely trapped. We need help."

Spock thought quickly and asked for further information. "Doctor, please advise the condition of the injured, and the height and width of the area in which you are trapped."

"I don't know, Spock," came the unhelpful reply. "Both of them are hurt, but I don't know how badly as my instruments aren't working. I don't think it's too serious, but we've got to get them back to the Enterprise to be sure."

"What about your location?" insisted Spock.

"I haven't got time to describe my surroundings to you. Don't waste time!" came the angry reply.

"Doctor," Spock said patiently, "I must know the size of the area in which you are trapped in order to calculate the amount of air supply you have. Three of you trapped in a small space, even with two unconscious, will not have air for very long. It is essential that I know the extent of the problem."

McCoy came back on the communicator sounding contrite. It was obvious that he had not thought of that aspect of their predicament. He gave Spock the details, and the Vulcan advised him that they had air for approximately three hours only; he would attempt to break through to them from his own area, which was much larger.

The Admiral broke in on him. "Surely it would be easier for us to break through from here to the second corridor, and then direct to the shuttledeck."

"That is correct," replied Spock, unable to deny the truth. "However, to do so would leave the Captain, Dr. McCoy and Mr. Mark in danger. We must break through to them first."

"Surely you are more concerned about the engine, Mr. Spock?" queried the Admiral, assuming that would be Spock's concern and wishing to bait him on the matter.

"The engine is quite safe where it is, Admiral, and if necessary I will destroy it. My first responsibility is to the Captain."

So saying, Spock turned from the Admiral, and after confirming with McCoy that the doctor should conserve the air by remaining

quiet, he commenced to tackle the debris dividing him from the doctor. The Admiral watched for a minute and then, with a slight grimace at the thought of working with the Vulcan, joined Spock in the task. After all, his concern had to be for the people, too.

The Admiral was not aware that Spock, like the Captain and Mark, had been caught by the falling debris. Being on the other side of the crate had saved him from the worst of the fall-in, but he had been hit by falling metal and had suffered a deep cut along his arm. He was dealing with the pain, but could not prevent the flow of blood. This ran onto the supports as he battled to get them cleared, and its loss began to sap at his strength. Spock kept at it doggedly, aware that his friends were in danger and that he was the only one in a position to help.

Every fifteen minutes Spock checked on McCoy with the stated intention of checking the air supply situation and the state of the injured. That was the excuse he used, but he was acutely conscious of the Human need for contact with the others and for reassurance, and knew the regular reports helped the doctor to survive his ordeal. After an hour and a half of working Spock checked through to discover that the doctor was finding the place hot and stuffy, the first sign that the air was going.

Spock redoubled his efforts, passing pieces of debris and twisted metal to the Admiral, who shifted them away from their point of entry. The Admiral, finally noticing Spock's green blood on the items he was carrying but not making the connection, commented, "They seem to use a lot of green paint in their construction. I wonder what it's for?"

Spock looked at him. Finding the Admiral to be truly unaware of what the 'paint' was he decided not to trouble him. He replied, "It is not important at present, Admiral. We must concentrate our efforts on breaking through to the Captain."

The Admiral nodded, but in fact he was desperately tired. After another five minutes he asked Spock if they could rest. Spock was loth to do so, but he could see that the Admiral was really tired. He nodded and said, "I believe a ten minute rest would be in order, Admiral, but time is running out. In the meantime I will continue."

The Admiral was too tired to do anything other than sit down where he was. However, after he had watched Spock for some minutes, and had begun to get his breath back, he began to really look at the Vulcan. In truth he was a fair man, but one totally consumed by his personal troubles, and inclined not to be able to see beyond them. When he looked more carefully at Spock, he had to admit to himself that the Vulcan was working flat out, and with no other motive than to save his Captain and the others.

It was only when Spock turned back towards him with yet another piece of the roof support that the Admiral noticed the drops of green falling from his arm onto the metal, and realised that Spock was bleeding. He was immediately annoyed with himself, and then annoyed with Spock for not telling him. He said quickly, "Spock, you're bleeding. It's not paint at all. Why didn't you tell me? I thought your blood was red. Dr. McCoy said it had Human elements in it, and I just assumed it would be red."

Spock stopped, surprised that the Admiral sounded concerned for him. "I can manage, Admiral," he replied. "It is more important for us to get through before their air supply runs out."

"Let me bandage it up, at least," said Chase.

Spock refused, saying that would waste precious time. The Admiral considered ordering him, but deciding that his order would be ignored, and realising that Spock did not mind being reprimanded for insubordination later if he could save his friends now, he began to revise his opinion both of Spock and himself.

Had his personal pain at the parting with T'Lar really blinded him to the truth? Had he been wrong in his opinion of T'Lar, too? He closed his mouth - which had opened to shout at the Vulcan - and decided instead to help him.

Spock, although concentrating on clearing the way to Captain Kirk, was quick to notice the Admiral's change in attitude. The two of them began to work together, and the work therefore went more quickly.

Precisely 2.45 hours after the cave-in Spock broke through. The hole was only small, but it allowed air to pass from their area to the doctor's.

McCoy tried to stand up, but found himself too weak to do so. Spock could see him through the hole, and advised him to remain where he was until they had broken completely through.

In another 15 minutes the hole was large enough for a man to pass through, and Spock went in. He pushed the doctor back through the hole towards the Admiral and then went over to look at the two injured Humans. He was relieved to find both breathing, although rather hoarsely. This was not surprising in the stale air, and he could find nothing seriously wrong with either of them. He picked up the Captain and gently pushed him through the hole, passing him to the Admiral. As their hands met in the transfer Chase pulled away from him, as though the contact had hurt. However, when he pushed Mark through, the Admiral did not even flinch. Spock met his eyes; it was the Admiral who looked away first, but the look he gave Spock no longer held hatred. Chase looked, if anything, slightly confused. Although he would not admit it, except to himself, Spock was relieved.

Spock came back through the hole to be greeted by McCoy with the words, "Well, Spock, we're not out of the woods yet."

In most circumstances Spock would have quizzed the good doctor about the lack of wood on board the freighter, so when he did not even raise an eyebrow at the comment McCoy's medical instincts were aroused. He cursed the damaged scanner, which would have revealed the truth immediately, but he had always sworn that a good doctor didn't need gadgets, and therefore he awaited an opportunity to study the Vulcan more closely.

Spock bent over Mark and then Kirk to check that they were all right before turning wearily towards the other end of their own area. He spoke, not to McCoy but to the Admiral.

"Admiral, if we are to reach safety we must make another hole here through to the second corridor, as you initially suggested. Are you rested enough to try it?"

The Admiral nodded. If Spock was ready then he was, too.

McCoy stopped the two of them in their tracks. "Hang on one minute, Admiral, Spock. Before the two of you go off half-cocked let's just remember who's the doctor here. I want to check you both over before you start any more digging."

McCoy knew he was right about Spock when the Vulcan pointedly ignored him and commenced to pick up pieces of debris from the left-hand wall. The Admiral, suddenly remembering the blood, added his weight.

"You're right, Doctor. Commander Spock has a deep cut that needs bandaging; he would not let me look at it earlier because he said it would waste too much time."

Spock didn't look up. He just said very quietly, "We are *still* working against time, gentlemen."

McCoy was saved the trouble of a heated argument by the addition of yet another voice on their side. Kirk had come round in time to hear the end of their conversation, and he said, "Spock, let Dr. McCoy look at your arm right now. That's an order."

Spock was so pleased to see Kirk come round that he didn't even blink at the Captain's tone of voice. "Captain!" was the only word he uttered as he turned submissively back to the doctor.

McCoy muttered to himself about crazy Vulcans without enough sense to look after themselves, but knowing himself that they were racing against time he satisfied himself with bandaging Spock's arm tightly to cut down the loss of blood, and filling him with an injection to keep him going.

Spock did not resist. He felt the benefits of the stimulant immediately, and turned back to the wall, if not refreshed then at least a little better prepared for the work ahead.

McCoy had even more trouble with the Captain, but gave in enough to let Kirk join the working party after checking there were no serious repercussions from his loss of consciousness. "You've got a concussion, Jim, but I guess it's no worse than Spock's arm, so let's get to work."

McCoy joined them too. Kirk and Spock worked side by side at the 'coal face', and McCoy and Admiral Chance worked to clear away whatever pieces of rubble and metal they were handed.

Spock stopped suddenly and held up his hand for silence. After listening intently for a few seconds he picked up a piece of metal and banged three times against the wall supports. After a long moment an answering clang came through.

Spock said, "As I suspected, it would appear that Mr. Scott is attempting to reach us from the other side."

"A rescue party!" shouted McCoy.

"I believe that is what I said, Doctor," said Spock mildly.

After further messages tapped backwards and forwards Spock advised the others that Mr. Scott would be using some drilling equipment to reach through to them. It was too dangerous to use explosives, but nevertheless it was necessary for them to move as far away from the wall as possible and wait until Scott's team reached

them. Spock suggested they retired to the section Kirk, McCoy and Mark had just vacated. It was Kirk who picked up the young man, but as he did so, Bob Mark came round.

"Where am I? What happened?" he asked.

"We had a small cave-in, but we're about to be rescued," Kirk said reassuringly. "We're just moving back beyond the wall here so my Chief Engineer can break through to us safely."

McCoy moved over to assist Mark too, and was relieved to find the young man seemed perfectly well in spite of his ordeal. "What I wouldn't give for the resilience of youth!" said the doctor.

Admiral Chance and Kirk smiled knowingly. Spock ignored the comment altogether.

The five of them settled in the ante-room. The space was cramped and there was no choice but to huddle together. Spock placed himself in front of Kirk, and on receiving a questioning look from his Captain said,

"Should there be another cave-in, Captain, it is likely to come from behind us. I believe I am best placed to react if I remain near the entrance."

It was McCoy who commented, "Pull the other one, Spock. No-one is going to react quickly enough to stop a cave-in. All that will happen is that you will be the first to get hit."

Spock did not look round at the doctor. He looked instead at Jim Kirk, and the look was one that said to his Captain that he wished to remain where he was, and even a direct order from Kirk was not going to move him.

Kirk laughed, a gentle, amused sound. "As I think I've said before, Mr. Spock, you're a stubborn man."

Spock acknowledged this with a nod, settling down to watch and wait with his customary patience now that he was satisfied that he could keep guard.

Admiral Chance kept his peace for ten minutes. For him it was a long ten minutes, spent entirely in self-searching. At the end of that time he came to a decision. He was a man who wasted little time reviewing the past once a decision had been made. This time he knew that the decision he had made had not been a fair one. Worse still, it had hurt a lot of other people - his young friend Captain Kirk, his old friend Admiral Nogushi, and all the crew of the Enterprise. It had hurt three people most of all - Spock, himself, and the person he loved most in the world, T'Lar. This was one decision he was going to reverse.

He spoke quietly. "Gentlemen," he began, "this is not going to be easy for me, but I have a long story I wish to tell you. First, however, if you will allow me, Captain Kirk, I wish to tender my personal apologies to your First Officer, Mr. Spock."

All eyes swivelled to look at the Admiral, all except the dark eyes of the Vulcan. Spock looked at the floor and said just as quietly,

"No apology is necessary, Admiral. If I have been of some

service in helping you to understand the Vulcan way of life, that in itself is an honour."

Kirk, however, did not wish to let the matter rest. He had not understood what was going on, but he knew he had to hear what Bill Chance was going to say. He had to hear it, because he did not want the man he had grown up admiring to go down in his estimation, and he had been struggling to keep an objective opinion of the Admiral ever since he had beamed on board the Enterprise.

"If you don't mind, Bill," he said, "I should like to hear what you have to say. It will help me clear up a few things in my own mind."

Admiral Chance looked from the bowed head of the Vulcan back to the clear, expectant hazel eyes of the Captain. "Jim," he said, looking back at Spock, "you're a very lucky man."

Kirk understood the compliment Chance had just paid his First Officer, whose head lifted at this - to him - strange comment.

"If I act now, I may just be in time to become a very lucky man myself."

So saying, Admiral Chance quietly told the story of his meeting with the beautiful Vulcan Lady T'Lar. T'Lar was the daughter of Sakeer, a member of the Vulcan Council, and the Admiral had met her at an official dinner on Earth when she had been visiting her relatives, the Vulcan Ambassador Sarek and his wife the Lady Amanda.

McCoy let out a whistle at this point, but Kirk, remembering Spock's breaking the computer's security access codes to obtain classified personal information, had already guessed that whatever was involved was likely to be a family matter, and therefore a question of Vulcan honour.

Vulcans were very strong on family, and Vulcan honour was the only thing Kirk could imagine transcending the honour of Starfleet itself for his First Officer. Spock's parents, Sarek and Amanda, although the latter was Human, had brought their son up to respect Vulcan family traditions and honour above all. Spock was an honourable man. His conduct over the past few weeks, and in the past few minutes, had demonstrated that above all.

The Admiral went on to explain that he had fallen in love with T'Lar. She was everything he had admired in a woman. He had thought he was too old ever to marry, but she was the right age for him. T'Lar, he had felt sure, had fallen in love with him too. He had accompanied her back to Vulcan, and had been introduced to her family.

Spock's eyebrows rose at this point; that was indeed a great honour, and a sign that T'Lar did indeed love this man.

They had spoken of marriage, and she had even been willing to go with him to Earth to live. Then T'Lar had introduced him to the idea of the mind link. Admiral Chance had been horrified. The idea of having your mind permanently linked to that of another so that you knew each other's thoughts terrified him. His thoughts were not always what he would like them to be, and he did not like that idea at all.

T'Lar had explained that the link did not mean an invasion of

his private thoughts. He could release as little or as much of himself as he wished, but the link would be there always, so that each would be a part of the other.

Admiral Chance had refused. He had accused T'Lar of not loving him enough. She had replied that Vulcans did not speak of love as Humans did, but to her the mind link was the most precious gift she could offer him. If he could not accept a link to her mind, then he rejected her.

The Admiral said that he had felt let down. It had never occurred to him that it was he who was being unreasonable. He had wanted T'Lar's love on Human terms. He had not understood how much she had already bent her Vulcan ways to meet him. Nor had he realised how different those Vulcan ways were, nor how difficult it was for a Vulcan to express the things he held inside him. He had not realised how far he had pushed T'Lar, and tried to make her change into something she was not, into something different from that which he had fallen in love with.

At this point the Admiral looked over to Spock again. Kirk too glanced at his First Officer. Spock studiously kept his eyes on the ground. Kirk knew this was probably necessary for the Vulcan to keep control of those well-hidden emotions. Kirk was glad that he had never pushed his First Officer as Admiral Chance had pushed T'Lar. He too wanted Spock to unbend a little, but only as far as Spock felt himself able to. He never wanted the Vulcan to break. There was something precious about having a friend like Spock just the way he was. Kirk didn't want to change him, only to understand him and help him understand himself.

McCoy gave a slightly guilty cough at this point. He tended to push Spock pretty hard, and he was wondering if he pushed too hard. The cough caused Spock to look at the doctor. Their gazes met and held - clear blue eyes and deep brown ones that understood each other perfectly. Spock said nothing, but McCoy knew that Spock was telling him he had not pushed too far, and that he had been grateful for the doctor's understanding - and even his pushing, on occasion.

The moment was broken by the sound of the drill breaking through, and then the Chief Engineer's heavy Scottish accent came through to them. "Och, there ye are. Ye can come out now - 'tis quite safe."

Kirk said quickly, "What will you do now, Bill?"

The Admiral looked at him, then back at McCoy and Spock. "I think I'll take a page out of your book, Jim. I'll come clean and tell T'Lar the whole story, and hope she will take me back; rather like your coming clean with me after that lecture at the Academy all those years ago! It will be hard for her to forgive me, but it's about time I came out with the truth and tried to start again, accepting her for what she is, and really trying to understand what she is telling me, not just listening to the words."

Spock spoke for the first time. "Trying to understand another is the first step to understanding the true meaning of infinite diversity in infinite combinations." He hesitated a long moment before continuing, and telling them all that he understood far more than he would normally admit to. "One who truly loves another can forgive much."

Three pairs of eyes met and held: deep brown, clear blue, and

the Captain's hazel. Here there was much understanding, much forgiveness and much love. Words were not only unnecessary, they were completely redundant.

It was McCoy and not Spock who first found the emotion too much to bear. If the truth be known he kept his own emotions well hidden under the gruff face he showed to the world. Kirk and Spock together had come closer to breaking his cover than they would ever know. He broke the moment of understanding abruptly and purposefully.

"You'll have to tell me what a certain Ensign Kirk did to you all those years ago. I'll bust a gut trying to find out if you don't let on."

Kirk and Spock continued to lock gazes for a moment, expressing their understanding of their own relationship and of their relationship with the doctor. Then Spock looked down and said, "I shall make arrangements for the crate, Captain." The Vulcan made it clear that he would not drop his guard in front of the crew; what was between the Captain, the doctor and himself was a personal thing, as the love between the Admiral and T'Lar must be.

The Admiral told Spock that he understood this now by saying, "Not before you let Dr. McCoy look at that arm of yours, Mr. Spock - and that's an order."

Spock responded as he would have to the Captain. "As you wish, sir."

It was two weeks later, with the freighter's crew and the engine safely transferred to another vessel and the Admiral returned home, that the Enterprise got a surprise call from Admiral Nogushi at Starfleet Command. Lt. Uhura put the call on the main bridge viewscreen at Kirk's request.

"Admiral, this is a surprise," said Kirk, smiling. Nogushi was the man who had arranged Kirk's captaincy of the Enterprise against much opposition to the appointment of someone so young to such a position of responsibility.

"I have a special reason for contacting you personally, Jim," said Nogushi, not a man to waste words. "Are your First officer and your Chief Medical Officer at hand?" he asked, knowing that he would find them one either side of Kirk's command chair.

At Kirk's nod Uhura widened the angle of her transmission so that Nogushi could see the whole bridge, with Kirk flanked by Spock and McCoy, as expected.

"I wanted to pass on a personal invitation from Admiral Chance. He would like to invite the three of you to be his special guests at his wedding to T'Lar of Vulcan in four weeks time. I have given the Enterprise orders that will put you within striking distance of Vulcan at the appropriate time. The Admiral insists on having a Vulcan wedding."

Three pairs of eyes looked at three separate non-existent blemishes on the Enterprise's deck, while three minds reflected on the dangers involved in a Vulcan wedding. This would be different, though. The wedding was straightforward, unless one of the parties involved in the betrothal - which was usually arranged at a young age

of 7 or 8 - did not wish to marry the other.

"We'll be delighted to accept," Kirk said, suddenly beaming and knowing that he spoke for them all.

"I have one more message, Jim," continued Nogushi, with what Kirk interpreted as a mischievous grin.

The Captain tensed. Nogushi saw it and said, "It's okay, Jim, it's not you I'm after this time. It's that Vulcan First Officer of yours."

Spock stared straight back at the Admiral, and was surprised when Nogushi started to laugh.

"I would like to congratulate you, Mr. Spock, on handling my problem so expertly. I nearly lost a very good Admiral to an unreasonable obsession. I knew that any Vulcan who could so completely win over a hard-nosed, young, hot-headed Captain who didn't want my choice of First Officer could break an Admiral of his unreasonable prejudice. Admiral Chance's reports on crew morale and particularly on the performance of a certain First Officer bear this out admirably - if you take my meaning."

Spock stared back, pale faced, realising that he had been set up by Nogushi.

"One thing though, Mr. Spock," came the Admiral's voice, hardened now. "If you ever try and break Starfleet security codes again you'll not find it that easy." The Admiral had not finished. "You needn't look smug, Jim. I know Spock too well. He might have broken Starfleet codes to uphold Vulcan honour, but he would never let you take the blame for his actions, so you were in on it too. As it happens, this time it was just what the Admiral wanted. If it ever happens again, you may not have my co-operation in the matter. I hope that is understood."

Brown, hazel and blue eyes met again. The doctor summed it up very nicely. "You play a pretty mean game of psychology, Admiral."

The Admiral smiled back, as unperturbed as any Vulcan. "That's what being an Admiral is all about, Doctor. It's good to know I understand my officers so well. See you all at the wedding. Nogushi out."

"Let's hope this wedding is a bit less eventful than the last one," Kirk said after a long minute.

"Indeed," Spock said.

"Bound to be," offered McCoy. "After all, those two really love each other."



TIMES LIKE THESE

by

Marcia Pecor

*Golden oceans beckon me, the tide at wind's command,
breezes redolent of wheat assail the senses.
Crystal rivers mirror sky above, and near, my hand,
anger, dirt, and painful memory kindly cleanses.*

Kirk made a face, uttered an expletive, and crumpled the old-fashioned paper in his hands.

"I can't write poetry, Spock - it gives me a headache."

The Vulcan, reclining elegantly on the stream bank, removed a grass stem from between his lips and turned his gaze from the slow-moving water to his friend.

"By what train of logic have you come to that conclusion, Jim? It has been my observation that there are myriad things which give you headaches."

"Well, poetry is one of them, obviously," fussed the Captain, poking the equally antiquated lead-filled stylus behind his ear.

"I regret having caused you frustration, Captain. It is a mind discipline I learned when quite young - about four, I believe - which proved invaluable in calming and organising my thoughts..."

"Yes, Spock, I understand how it must have helped you," Kirk said irritably as he decimated a lowly daisy petal by petal. "But I'm not dealing with just *thoughts*." He tossed the denuded stem into the water.

"True, Captain." The First Officer sacrificed the grass stem in like manner and stood, looking down upon the Captain. "Emotions do get in the way, don't they?"

"That they do, Spock. Often when you least want them to."

A signal bleeped from the Vulcan's chronometer, and his eyes registered regret, though his features remained impassive. He could not fail to notice the visible stiffening of his friend, the determined set of the jaw.

"It's time to go back to the ship, Jim."

The broad shoulders slumped just perceptibly. "I know. Everything's done here, anyway. The new owners move in next week, and any right I may have had to come here will be forfeit."

A strange desire to understand what Kirk was feeling came over Spock, and he stepped in front of the Captain, causing him to look directly up at his Science Officer for the first time since they'd beamed down.

"You grew up here. Your brother, your mother..."

"Both gone, now."

"Your father..."

"He was never here." The hazel eyes wavered, looked away.

Spock tried another tactic.

"The owners could perhaps be prevailed upon to allow you to visit occasionally."

"No, Spock. Memories are memories. In my mind, in my heart. There's nothing here for me any more."

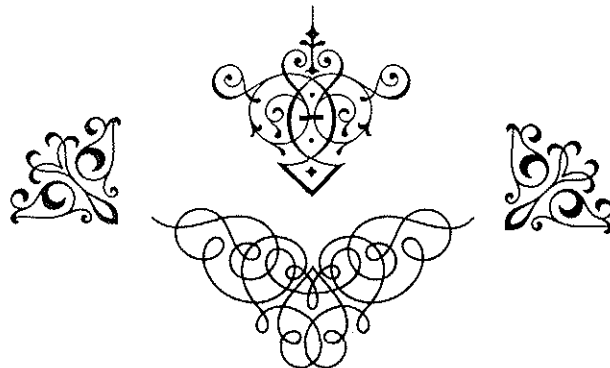
They walked back towards the farmhouse, Kirk lagging behind. Spock turned to see him kick the stump of what had been an ancient tree and look up at a second-storey window. The Captain glanced over his shoulder and smiled at his curious friend, gesturing towards the stump.

"Elm. Over two hundred years old. I'd crawl out of my bedroom window and climb as high as I dared, staring at the stars. Sam found me one night and scared the hell out of me when he yelled. I lost my grip and fell, just managing to break my fall on a low-lying limb. Then I was yelling, and Sam was yelling..."

Kirk paused, blinking to erase the vivid memory, and turned his back on the house. "They cut it down last week. Too near the house, they said."

Spock felt it best to keep his thoughts to himself. There would be opportunity for Kirk to work through yet another crisis in his life. Only this one would take a little more time, and a little more patience on his part. He knew all too well how gritty his friend could become at times like these. But it was times like these which drew friends closer together. Poetry might not be the answer, but understanding certainly was the key.

He stood silently, perhaps a little closer than usual, beside his commanding officer, willing to wait until that moment when his friend would reach out to him and share those precious memories of childhood on an old Iowa farm.



IN SEARCH OF HOMO VULCANIS

by

Nicole Comtet

"Captain's Log, Stardate 4439.5.

"After two weeks of well deserved rest at Starbase 6 - the postponement of our shore leave was due to the investigation we were ordered to conduct in the Gamma 7A system, which was annihilated by an amoeba-like entity we eventually succeeded in destroying - the Enterprise is about to leave on another mission to the planet Iotia. But special instructions have been sent by Starfleet Command to transport a very important cargo to Beryl IV, a small class M planet where remains of an ancient civilisation have been discovered.

"The cargo, which arrived by special shuttle from Earth, consists of digging and research equipment in the care of an expert in paleontology; it has to be delivered to the team of archaeologists already at work on Beryl IV, which is on the way to Iotia, our final destination.

"The expert, Doctor Suzan Starkis, and her equipment are being beamed on board from the Starbase dock to our store-rooms. As soon as possible, when we receive the go-ahead signal from the Base, we will get under way."

Having completed his report Captain Kirk switched off the recorder, gave a turn to the command chair, and looked up to the library computer station.

"Mr. Spock," he asked his First Officer, "have you ever met this person, Suzan Starkis?"

"No, Captain, not personally, but I have heard about her, and I have read some articles concerning her in our Vulcan Scientific Journal. She was trained by the famous prehistorian Professor Baronel from Terra; she specialises in paleontology, and has taken doctors' degrees in anthropology, paleobiology and ethnography. I understand she was called to join the expedition on Beryl IV because of some startling discoveries it has made there."

"Well, from your description she seems quite an expert! I'm sure you will have many enriching conversations together during our seven days voyage to Beryl IV."

"I suppose so, Captain, though some of her theories are not quite accepted by the scientific authorities, and by the Vulcan Science Academy in particular. However, it might be interesting."

The intercom whistled, and the Captain switched it on.

"Kirk here," he answered. "Ah, Scotty, I was expecting your call. What kept you?"

"She did, Captain!" The Chief Engineer's voice sounded peevish. "I've never seen anything like it. Tons of crates and containers - the storage bay is choked full of them. You couldn't fit in a needle. And they need all this material to dig up a few old bones."

Kirk answered with a chuckle, "Well, they probably do, since they've had it brought specially from Earth. Where is Dr. Starkis now? And have you seen Chekov?"

"Yes, Captain, he's taken her to her quarters. And about time - she was driving me crazy. Your paleontologist is so damn particular. She wanted to check everything herself - she was ordering my lads around as if we didn't know our jobs. Believe me, Captain, she's going to be difficult. But anyway, I've completed my checks, and we are ready to go when you say the word."

"Okay, Scotty, stand by. I'm waiting for the Starbase signal. Kirk out."

The doors of the turbolift opened and Chekov walked briskly down to the navigation console.

"Mr. Chekov, did you take care of our passenger?" the Captain asked.

"Yes, Captain. I escorted her to her cabin, and I delivered your invitation to dinner. I also told her Dr. McCoy would contact her about her physical tests."

"Good. As soon as we hear from the base we can go. Will you check our course to Beryl IV?"

"Yes, sir," answered Chekov, sitting down and starting to work on the keyboard.

"What's she like?" Sulu asked in a low voice, his eyes twinkling with curiosity. "Pretty, I hope."

"Huh," said Chekov, making a long face, "she looks like my grandmother from Nijni-Novgorod."

"What!" exclaimed Sulu, laughing. "I didn't know you had a grandmother in Nijni-Novgorod."

"I don't," replied Chekov crossly. "But if I had, that's what she would look like."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know, Starkis has her hair tied back in a bun, and she wears that device for sight they used to wear long ago... What do they call them...? Spectacles."

"Gracious me! They went out of fashion ages ago." This was from Uhura, looking down from her station.

"Now, now, gentlemen," put in Kirk. "You mustn't judge people by their appearance. Dr. Starkis is probably one of those scientists who don't care about their looks. Did she make any comments, and requests, Mr. Chekov?"

"No, Captain, except that she inquired about Mr. Spock."

"Did she? Do you hear that, Spock?" inquired Kirk, looking up to the science station.

Spock replied without looking round, his long hands busy on the computer keyboard. "Since I am in charge of the science department, it seems logical that Miss Starkis would do so."

"Beg pardon, Mr. Spock," put in Chekov eagerly, "but she seems interested in you personally, as a Vulcan. She says she has never seen a Vulcan, and she wants to study you."

Instinctively everyone on the bridge turned around to watch the reaction of the First Officer. Spock looked down at them with an enigmatic expression on his face, then raised his right eyebrow and without comment turned back to his console.

His shipmates were still chuckling when Uhura called,

"Captain, a message from Starbase 6. We have the green light. And Commander Arkangel wishes to speak to you, sir."

"Put him on the main screen, Lieutenant."

Almost immediately there appeared on the screen the smiling face of the commander of the base, an old friend of Kirk's from Starfleet Academy.

"Well, Jim, it's time for farewells, I think. Don't forget my invitation when you return from Iotia. By the way, have you met your passenger?"

"Not yet, Frank, too busy. Why?"

"Oh," replied Arkangel, with a grin, "I just wanted to know what you thought about her, that's all. How long will it take to get her to her destination?"

"About a week, maybe less."

"Well, I wish you joy. Goodbye, Jim, and fair wind for Enterprise!"

"Thank you, Frank. See you when we get back."

The screen went blank, and Kirk gave orders to leave orbit, wondering inwardly, with some misgivings, what his friend had meant, and what kind of passenger his vessel was carrying. He was to find out soon enough.

"Doctor, a lady to see you."

Dr. McCoy, who was dictating a report, looked up as his office door opened and a bespectacled woman walked in, ushered by a medical assistant. He got to his feet with his most charming smile.

"Dr. Starkis? I am Leonard McCoy. Please come in."

"Glad to meet you, Doctor," she answered, shaking hands, "but I don't understand. Do I have to undergo a medical examination?"

"Yes, it's the regulation in Starfleet. Everyone on a

deep-space vessel must have routine physicals. It won't take long."

"This is ridiculous!" she protested. "I had one on Terra before leaving."

"Sorry, my dear, but it can't be helped; and it will give us the chance to become better acquainted."

Dr. Starkis was obliged to comply, but she looked quite displeased.

McCoy kept the conversation running to put his visitor at ease and to figure out what kind of person she was. Physically, she was a medium sized girl in her late twenties, with a freckled face framed by straight-combed auburn hair done in a chignon, and with brown eyes set close to a short nose. In McCoy's opinion she might have been nice-looking but for the frown which seemed to knit her eyebrows permanently, and gave her a rather dour expression. He wondered whether this was in her nature - she seemed rather quick-tempered - or the result of hard pressure through her career. He had taken time to check her record in the science section library, and it was quite impressive. *After all, he reflected, she must have had a tough time reaching such a position.*

"Tell me, Miss Starkis," he said after a while, "why do you wear glasses? You are short-sighted, I see, but don't you think that contact lenses would be more handy, especially in your profession?"

"I can't bear contact lenses; I'm allergic to them, and by now I'm so used to my glasses I don't even notice them. I am often told they're obsolete, but I don't care."

"In a way, they suit you very well," replied McCoy politely. "Well, that's it - I don't need to bother you any more. You're in perfect health, Miss Starkis."

"I knew that, Doctor. That's why I still think it was a waste of time. You and I have more important things to do."

McCoy smiled. "You sound just like our First Officer. I have the devil of a time to get him here for his medical examinations. He claims he has better things to do."

The girl's rather stern face brightened perceptibly. "Your First Officer? You mean the Vulcan?"

"Yes, indeed. Mr. Spock is also Science Officer, you know."

"Oh, wonderful! I must have a chance to work with him. You see, Dr. McCoy, my speciality is paleontology, particularly the study of Homo Sapiens on Terra and on other worlds, and Professor Baronel and I have found certain similarities between Cro-Magnon man of Terra and primitive Homo Vulcanis of Vulcan."

"Is that so?" drawled McCoy. "Do you mean that Vulcans and Humans could be distant cousins? I wonder what Spock would say about that!"

"We are almost certain, but we still have to find the link, of course," she went on eagerly. "That is why the presence of a Vulcan on board the Enterprise is the chance of a lifetime. I've never seen a Vulcan, and I doubt I shall ever go there. So you

understand, Dr. McCoy, how important it is for me to study your Vulcan, his anatomy, his craniology, his habits, his reactions. I have to know everything about him. It is so exceptional to have a live specimen near at hand, you see."

Nurse Chapel, who had not missed a word of the conversation, stared at the doctor, both of them bewildered. Then McCoy overcame his amazement.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Starkis, but do you mean that Spock represents an object of scientific study for you?"

"Of course, Doctor," Starkis said dryly.

"Well, what about that!" McCoy was much amused as he anticipated the First Officer's reaction, but Chapel looked shocked.

Captain Kirk, smart in dress uniform, was standing near the bar in the officers' mess, and while sipping his drink was covertly watching his guest, Suzan Starkis, in conversation with Dr. McCoy.

His vast experience with women throughout the galaxy came in handy in trying to define the personality of the prehistorian.

She certainly looks clever, he thought, but rather headstrong. Too bad she doesn't know how to dress to make the best of herself. That colour doesn't suit her, and why do her hair in that style? Chekov was right, it makes her look older, especially with those glasses. If she paid more attention to her appearance she might be... say... interesting.

His thoughts were interrupted by a question from McCoy, which brought him back to the conversation.

"Ah... yes, of course, Bones, our library is at the disposal of Miss Starkis. You will find, I believe, Dr. Starkis, all the information on history, prehistory and archaeology you can ask for. The computer terminal in your room is linked with the library computer, and you can have access to any data you like, except classified material, of course."

"Captain, I am at the moment particularly interested in Vulcans."

"Well, I know we have extensive banks of information about Vulcan, thanks to our Science Officer, Mr. Spock. You should ask him about it. Ah, here's Scotty. You've already met our Chief Engineer, I believe? Yes, of course."

The curt nod Scott gave the scientist was not particularly friendly.

"And now," Kirk went on hastily, "what about dinner? Scotty, bring your glass along, and let's sit down. Spock and the others shouldn't be long now."

The Captain shot a sidelong glance at Dr. McCoy, who came to his rescue and escorted their guest, settling her on Kirk's right.

At that moment the door slid open and Uhura and Sulu walked in, to be formally introduced by Kirk, and politely acknowledged by

Suzan Starkis, whose attention seemed especially attracted to Uhura, who was striking in a flowing African gown.

"Captain," said Sulu, sitting down, "Mr. Spock begs to be excused for being late. He is completing some data processing. He says he will be down in a few minutes, and asks you not to wait for him."

"All right, then, let's start," decided Kirk, signalling to the steward in attendance. Usually everyone helped themselves from the food dispensers, but when a guest was entertained in the officers' dining room, the Captain like to have the service done with more style.

Helped by Dr. McCoy, valiantly supported by Sulu and Uhura, Kirk managed to keep the conversation running through the first course, but he had the distinct impression that everyone's attention was somewhat listless, including his guest. The empty seat between Uhura and Sulu looked very conspicuous.

Good god, thought Kirk, they all seem to be waiting for Spock. What's he doing, anyway? It's not like him to be late. I wonder how Suzan will react? If she's never seen a Vulcan, she's in for a shock.

And indeed, when the door silently opened and Spock appeared, the prehistorian stopped in mid sentence and stared, astounded. The doctor and the Captain exchanged a knowing look over her head, McCoy winked at Kirk, then both turned their attention to the newcomer.

It was a fact that Mr. Spock was quite a striking sight in dress uniform enhanced by gold braid glittering in the light. It seemed to Kirk that all the pride and nobility of Vulcan were painted on his friend's severe face.

Amazing how much he looks like his father at times, Kirk thought. (Spock's father was Ambassador Sarek, a very respected representative of Vulcan in the Federation.)

The Vulcan stood attention beside his chair. "I apologise for the delay, Captain," he said formally.

"That's all right, Spock. Dr. Starkis, let me introduce my First Officer, Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan bowed his dark head, saying gravely, "Much honoured, Dr. Starkis." Then he quietly sat down, apparently unaware of the great impression he was making on the young woman.

She was literally fascinated, taking in the dark eyes and slanted eyebrows topped by sleek black fringe, and the famous faunlike Vulcan ears framing his angular features. Her reaction was not lost on the other officers, who smiled discreetly at one another.

Actually Miss Starkis was delighted. Her expectations were not disappointed; on the contrary, this Vulcan officer looked much more interesting than all the pictures and holos of Vulcan natives she had studied. She looked forward to her experiments on the Enterprise; they promised to be most rewarding.

The dinner party progressed smoothly; the desultory conversation running round the table was evidence of a long-standing

friendship. With the arrival of another course, Dr. Starkis turned her attention back to her plate. But when the steward placed a large dish of salads and cooked vegetables, plus a glass of emerald green liquid in front of Mr. Spock, she could not help commenting.

"I see you are a vegetarian, Mr. Spock. It is a moral tradition on your planet, isn't it?"

Spock assented silently, but McCoy, who could not miss a chance to poke fun at his favourite antagonist, drawled,

"It's an obligation for Spock to drink a glass of this green stuff every day in order to keep his blood green, you understand."

Under cover of laughter the Captain said good-humouredly, "Really, Bones!"

McCoy, his blue eyes sparkling with glee, was staring brazenly at Spock, waiting for the usual sharp retort.

But Spock merely commented dryly, "You cannot resist a bad joke, can you, Doctor?"

Suzan Starkis, however, struck by the idea, began to assail Spock with questions about his green blood, his vegetarian diet, etc., questions which he answered briefly but with courtesy. But by and by the questions became more personal, and Kirk decided that it was time to put a stop to her curiosity. However, it befell Spock to do it in his own way.

The prehistorian wanted to know the cause of the unusual size and shape of Vulcan ears. "Are they just ornamental," she asked, "or the result of physiological evolution due to the particular conditions of the planet Vulcan?"

Spock, unlike his fellow officers, who were showing some signs of impatience at her insistence, remained unperturbed, and took his time. Putting down his knife and fork, he took a sip of his green beverage then joined his hands and replied reflectively,

"I think the accurate answer to your question, Dr. Starkis, is both. On the one hand, Vulcan ears are very aesthetic ornaments of great distinction, contrary to the opinions of some prejudiced people." (Here Spock shot a glance in the direction of the doctor, who replied with a derisive, "Pooh!") "On the other hand, these ears are necessary in our desert land and our dry climate. Because of our environment the Vulcan sensory organs are more developed than in other species. To catch the faint sound waves in the thin atmosphere of our planet, our ears have to be enlarged and pointed."

"Obviously," agreed Starkis. "This is very interesting, Mr. Spock. Your ears remind me of some species in the animal world, which have developed oversized hearing organs for the same reason. I recall having seen on Rigel V a breed of big apes with ears similar to yours."

This remark drew a burst of laughter, and an exclamation from Mr. Scott. "Are you going to let yourself be compared to a damned Rigellian ape, man?"

"Mr. Scott," replied the First Officer blandly, "why should I be offended by the alleged likeness of Vulcans to Rigellian apes? It is of little significance, compared to the quantity of hereditary

genes you Humans share with the chimpanzee. No," he went on placidly, "if we look for comparison with animals, a more likely one would be with two small mammals living on Earth. You are certainly familiar with them: the bat and the fennec, or fox of the sands."

"Yes, of course, the fennec!" exclaimed Uhura. "It's the most darling of animals, living in the Sahara Desert. It has sandy fur, a bushy tail, and the loveliest pair of long ears - just like yours, Mr. Spock," she added with a mischievous smile.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," said Spock, a faint twinkle in his dark eyes. "I also find the fennec more flattering than the Rigelian ape."

"But what about the bats, Mr. Spock? What have they in common with Vulcans?" inquired Sulu, enjoying himself.

"A good question, Mr. Sulu. For one thing, they have oversized ears, of course; and for another they have a sixth sense which enables them to see and move in darkness, and so have the Vulcans."

Suzan Starkis, who had followed the conversation with rapt interest, asked, "You mean you can also see in the dark? Indeed, with your greatly developed hearing and sight, you are comparable with the bats."

"Not quite, Dr. Starkis. Bats have a great superiority over Vulcans, alas," Spock replied gloomily.

"What is that?"

"They can fly. Vulcans, so far, have not grown wings."

Only then did the prehistorian discover to her cost that Vulcans - at least, Mr. Spock - also have a wry sense of humour. She was piqued, especially because of the hilarity the Vulcan's repartee had provoked. She looked huffily around, and the Captain, seeing her displeasure, wisely turned the conversation to other topics. The dinner party went on without mishap, and Spock was at last able to eat his frugal meal in peace.

A studious silence reigned in the laboratory. Two young ensigns in the science department were busy at the microscopes and monitoring instruments set on the central bench. Usually their work was not so absorbing as to prevent them from exchanging a few words, but the presence of their superior officer, immersed in intricate calculations, was enough to stop any desire to chatter. Though he seldom made any comment, they knew Spock disapproved of idle talk during working hours, and they would not dream of incurring his disapproval.

The quietness was interrupted by the swoosh of a sliding door, and by quick footsteps on the tiled floor. One of the girls, looking up, was surprised by an unknown woman addressing her sharply.

"Tell me, is Mr. Spock here? I was told I would find him in the laboratory. Where is he?"

"He's over there, ma'am," replied the girl, pointing to the other end of the room.

Dr. Starkis picked her way through the lab, and discovered the Vulcan intent on a computer screen. Forgetting for a moment the purpose of her visit, she stood watching the dark head with the elegant pointed ears, and the long fingers travelling swiftly over the keyboard.

Soon Spock became aware of her presence, looked up, and frowned slightly. "Dr. Starkis? Is there anything you want?"

"Mr. Spock, I have come to ask you something most important. But I hope I'm not disturbing you?"

"You are," replied Spock, deadpan.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked, taken aback.

"You are disturbing me, Miss Starkis. We have an important experiment in progress. However, I can give you five minutes."

"I'm sorry," she said, rather vexed, "but the research I am conducting is also very important. Do you realise that you are an exceptional subject for an anthropologist - I could even say unique."

With both eyebrows raised Spock replied coolly, "I hardly think so. There are seven billion seven hundred and fifty two thousand two hundred Vulcans on our home planet, not counting those stationed on other planets, colonies, space ships..."

"I know that, Mr. Spock," she interrupted with some impatience, "and I have all the data concerning the Vulcans. What I mean is, you yourself, because of your mixed parentage, are an ideal research subject for a scientist; being a scientist yourself, you should understand that."

Spock rose slowly to his feet and looked down at the obstinate face of the prehistorian. If there was something he understood it was intellectual curiosity, being himself afflicted with it. He could not discourage such zeal for knowledge. On the other hand, and in spite of the mental shields he kept raised in the presence of Humans, he felt oppressed by the violence of her emotions; it was very disturbing.

With an effort he maintained his usual impassive front and asked coldly, "May I know, Miss Starkis, how you are aware of my mixed parentage, as you put it?"

"Dr. McCoy told me that your mother is a Human from Terra."

"Did he?" said the Vulcan with a frown.

"Yes, but he refused to let me see your medical file, pretending that it is against regulations unless I can obtain your permission. Mr. Spock, please consider - you are the only Vulcan aboard, and you are the only chance for me to check Professor Baronel's theory, so I insist that you let me see your file, and give me the opportunity to examine you."

Spock's eyebrows went up to his sleek fringe. His Human side was getting a trifle annoyed. This young woman was damn obstinate, and what's more, she was taking his assistants away from their work, for he could distinctly hear stifled giggles behind him. He had to get rid of this person somehow.

Taking a deep breath he replied stonily, "Madam, if you are referring to the preposterous theory that Vulcans and Humans might rise from the same stock, all I can say is that I am appalled that such a ridiculous concept could ever arise in a scholar's mind. As for my permission to have access to my medical file, you may have it, if only to prove how much you and Professor Baronel are in error. And now, 5.6 minutes have passed; I request that you kindly let me resume my work, and leave this room."

"But I still have many questions to ask you, and I..."

"No, Miss Starkis, not now. You have already taken too much of my time. Please go."

Suzan Starkis, probably not used to that tone, and seething with spite, glared up at the Vulcan, who returned her gaze with perfect composure, but there was a glint in his eye that warned her not to go too far. With a sigh of frustration she turned on her heel and stalked out of the lab, infuriated that she could not slam the door.

The two young assistants, agape, turned their attention back to their superior, who inquired coolly, "Is anything the matter, Ensigns?"

"No, sir," they answered, blushing deeply.

"Carry on, then. I need the result of this analysis within the hour." And Mr. Spock resumed his calculations as though nothing had happened.

An hour later, however, the story had gone all round the ship. From the bridge down to engineering, everybody had heard of the incident between the prehistorian and the Science officer. Some gamblers in the crew were already taking wagers. Most of them, who knew their First Officer, would bet on Spock; but some, who had witnessed Miss Starkis' short temper, risked their wagers upon her. From then on, the doings of both of them would be carefully observed and commented on.

Mr. Spock had barely resumed his duty on the bridge when the intercom beeped at the Captain's chair.

"Kirk here."

"Oh, Jim, sorry," came the voice of Dr. McCoy, "but is Spock with you? I can't find him anywhere."

"Yes, Bones, he's just come back. Why?"

"Well, tell him to come down to sickbay right away. His examination was scheduled for this morning, and we're still waiting for him. He has managed to skip it twice already, but I'll be damned if I let him escape a third time!"

Kirk chuckled and looked up at his First Officer. This was a typical episode in the amicable strife between Spock and McCoy which had become legendary in the Fleet, and never failed to entertain the spectators.

"Did you hear that, Mr. Spock?"

"Captain?"

"You're expected in sickbay for your physical."

"But Captain, I was delayed in the lab, and consequently was late resuming my duty here."

"Ah, yes, I heard you had a visit from Dr. Starkis," said Kirk innocently. "What do you think of her - as a colleague in the sciences, I mean?"

Spock hesitated. "Miss Starkis' zeal for research is indeed commendable, but she should curb her propensity for overdoing it."

"Come, Spock," chided Kirk, keeping a straight face, "I thought you valued scientific curiosity?"

"I do, Captain, but not when it verges on inquisitiveness."

"I see. Well, what about your examination? McCoy is still waiting."

"I am," said the doctor's voice, "and I won't take no for an answer. If Spock's not down here in five minutes, I'll send a Security squad to get him. McCoy out."

Kirk could not help laughing. "I'm afraid you can't avoid it, Spock. It'll only take half an hour of your time, and Chekov will man your station in the meantime. Away you go. That's an order, Mr. Spock."

With a sigh the long-suffering Vulcan stood up and strode to the turbolift, muttering, "Anyway, I have a few things to settle with Dr. McCoy."

As soon as the doors shut behind him the bridge crew burst out laughing, and Uhura, who had heard the threat, cried with mock concern,

"Captain, do you think we should warn Dr. McCoy? I mean, is it safe for him?"

"Don't worry, Lieutenant, McCoy can take care of himself, and if the worst comes to the worst, they're in sickbay anyway. Besides, I rely on the efficiency of Nurse Chapel."

Indeed down in the medical section, thanks to the soothing presence of Christine Chapel, the physical examination of Mr. Spock was running smoothly; the doctor and the Vulcan had put off their differences until later.

Having completed his physical tests, Spock was now stretched out on the diagnostic bed, clad in his black trousers and undershirt. McCoy, standing by, was checking the figures on the panel and scribbling on his pad.

He finally said, "Mmmm... mmmm... good. Everything is normal by Vulcan standards; you're fit, as usual. There's just one little thing, however - I seem to detect a slight tremor in your blood pressure. Have you had any worries recently, or has anyone tried to pester you, by any chance?"

"Besides yourself, Doctor, no-one has 'pestered' me," replied Spock, deadpan.

You old fraud! thought McCoy. *As if I didn't know what happened in the lab section!* "Are you sure, Spock?" he asked aloud.

"Definitely, Doctor."

"T...t...t... It's curious, because I can see an unmistakeable rise in your blood pressure, increasing even now."

"Doctor," began Spock, "Vulcan blood never..."

A sudden commotion in the office next door interrupted them. Female voices were heard, raised in anger.

"No, Doctor," Chapel was saying, "you can't go in. Dr. McCoy is busy."

"I know," replied the dry voice of Suzan Starkis. "I want to attend Mr. Spock's medical examination."

"But you can't!" replied the nurse, taken aback. "It's impossible. You have no right to... Doctor!"

The door slid open and the prehistorian walked boldly in, followed by Nurse Chapel, who was flushed with anger. McCoy quickly walked around the bed to face the intruder.

"What do you think you're doing? You can't come in here."

"Doctor, I insist. For professional reasons you must let me examine the Vulcan's anatomy. I need to know for my work - I have to take measurements and make comparisons."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed McCoy. "Haven't you enough information from his personnel files?"

"No, Doctor. You know that theory is useless without field work. I must check my information on his person."

And Starkis pushed past the doctor to halt by the diagnostic bed on which Spock lay, apparently resigned, his eyes closed, his arms crossed on his chest. However, his tightly clasped hands betrayed a certain strain under his outward composure.

At the sight of the Vulcan the prehistorian looked surprised, and turned to Dr. McCoy. "Why is he fully clothed? Don't your patients ever strip to undergo their medical examinations?"

Dr. McCoy could not resist; he replied straight-faced, "They usually do, but our First Officer never strips in public - he's a very prudish man. But what do you want to see him stripped for? God knows, he looks ordinary enough, and the fact that his blood is green and his heart and his liver are placed on the wrong side makes no difference to his appearance."

"I am well aware of that, Doctor," said Miss Starkis, "but as a man of science you should know that information obtained directly from the subject is essential in research, and since you have no accurate information to give me..."

"Oh, but I have, my dear," retorted McCoy, who could see a

frown of displeasure on the Vulcan's face. "I have seen him stark naked more than once, when I've had to patch him up in surgery, so you can believe me when I tell you that except for those elegant pointed ears and satanic looks, there is nothing extraordinary about him. No cloven hooves, no tail, nothing. Sorry if I disappoint you."

Dr. Starkis replied stiffly, "That remark is in very bad taste, Doctor McCoy. What is more, that description doesn't apply to Satan, but to Pan, the Greek god of nature."

"What!" laughed McCoy. "Do you hear that, Spock? You're a god, now. Hey, wait a minute! What are you getting up for? I haven't finished with you!"

Spock had swung his long legs to the floor and reached for his blue shirt. "I have finished with you, Doctor," he replied with dignity. "I will not stay here any longer and listen to you and Dr. Starkis discuss my anatomy when I have better things to do. As for your dark hints about my devilish appearance, I have heard all about it already, thank you."

"Damn you, Spock, can't you take a joke once in a while? You just stay there, will you? I'll only ask you for one more minute." Then, turning to their visitor, "See now, Miss Starkis, what you've done. I've got him here at last for his physical, and you had to come and scare him away. Please, leave us now and go to my office. I won't be a moment. I'll talk to you later. As for you, Spock, don't you dare budge from here until I say so!"

The First Officer merely raised an eyebrow and watched the doctor fussily rush the young woman through the doorway in spite of her shrill objections, and deliver her into the care of Nurse Chapel.

"Whew!" sighed McCoy, shutting the door behind her. "What possessed the girl to barge in like that?"

"You can blame yourself, Doctor," replied Spock coolly. "You told her I am half Human, so she believes I am a rarity."

"If I did," answered McCoy hotly, "It was to stop her bothering you, to make her understand that you're not worth her attention since you're not a genuine full Vulcan. But apparently she thought otherwise. And, you know," he went on, resuming his medical survey, "come to think of it, she's right. You are a queer bird, you pointed-eared Homo Vulcanis. Yes, Spock, that's the official name she gave you - Homo Vulcanis Spockensis! Aren't you proud to be so labelled by such a distinguished prehistorian?"

"Certainly not, Doctor, especially when her method of research is based on a false concept and tends to unscientific obsession. Now, have you completed this examination at last? I have to resume duty on the bridge."

"Yes, Spock," said the doctor, removing his medical scanner. "I'm though with you. Incidentally, your metabolism is back to normal, nothing wrong with your blood pressure. I guess Suzie had something to do with it, hadn't she? Your Human half was infuriated, and no wonder!"

Spock, in the act of slipping on his shirt, did not reply, and the doctor concluded with a grin, "Okay, you close-mouthed Vulcan,

you can go with my blessing. But watch out - that girl is dangerous. Oh, by the way, she's waiting in my office, so you'd better leave by the back door."

The only answer he received from his patient was a silent glare, then the Vulcan was gone.

Jim Kirk, comfortable in jumper and blue jeans, was relaxing on his bunk with the latest best-seller when the intercom buzzed. He turned over and reached for the switch.

"Yes, Kirk here."

"Jim, can I come and see you? It's rather important," said the voice of Dr. McCoy.

"Yes, of course, Bones."

"Okay, then, I'll be right along."

Kirk laid his book down on the bed, got up and stretched, yawning loudly.

Presently the door buzzer sounded and the doctor walked in. "I hope I didn't wake you."

"No, I was just reading this book I bought at Starbase 6," said the Captain. "And now, Bones," Kirk continued, sitting down at his desk, "what have you been up to?"

"It's not me, Jim, it's this expert of yours."

"What, again?"

"Yes. Do you know what she did?"

"I heard that she went into the lab to interview Spock, right in the middle of an experiment."

"If it was only that!" exclaimed McCoy. "Yesterday she came into sickbay..." and he related the events with such liveliness that Kirk fairly choked with laughter.

"Yes, I know," conceded the doctor with a wide grin, "it sounds so damn funny when you think of it, especially since Spock is himself as curious as a cat in scientific matters; so of course to see him become a victim of such curiosity is too good to be true. At least, that was what I thought at the start. But now, Jim, it really is going too far. This girl is fairly running after Spock; he can't go anywhere but she turns up to badger him."

Kirk looked concerned. "It's certainly not fair on Spock, but I thought he was supposed to give her all the data about Vulcans for her thesis, or treatise, or whatever it is she's writing."

"He did. All the information from the library has been tied in to her computer terminal; he even gave her some personal tapes, and his permission to see his medical dossier."

Jim Kirk remained thoughtful for a moment, then inquired, "How did Spock take it?"

"With his usual Vulcan impassivity, naturally, but I noticed his blood pressure rose somewhat, and I'll bet his patience will soon wear thin if this game continues. I tried to reason with Suzan Starkis in my office, but she's so damn obstinate. She's determined to have her own way. You should talk to her, Jim; you're the Captain, she should listen to you."

"I'll do that," agreed Kirk. "You're quite right, Bones, this is going too far. I won't have her interfering with my officers. I understand now what Frank Arkangel meant the other day."

"What did he say?" asked the doctor, interested.

"He wished me joy."

"Did he now! She must have plagued him enough for the short time she was on the base. Tell me, Jim, how many more days till we reach Beryl IV?"

"Another six days, I'm afraid."

"Can't we go faster?"

"We're already at warp 4, and you know Scotty hates to have his precious engines overworked. Still, I'll talk to him - we might gain a day or two, as he doesn't seem to have taken kindly to her either."

"Why? What happened?" inquired McCoy.

"It seems that our Suzie tried to order Scotty and his team about in the cargo bay."

"Scotty too!" laughed the doctor. "What a girl! I've seldom seen anybody so bossy. I wonder if that's due to her career, or to some personal problems in her past."

"You should know, Bones, that's your job."

"I'm just a plain country doctor, Jim, not a psychiatrist. However, I can tell there's something the matter with her. Witness this obsession with Spock."

"Don't you think that this obsession, as you call it, might have another origin than scientific interest?"

McCoy looked surprised. "You mean... she might have a crush on Spock? Oh, certainly not!" And he burst out laughing.

"Why not?" insisted Kirk. "It wouldn't be the first time; you know how women are attracted to Spock."

"I know, Jim, but not this time. She has one sole idea in mind: her research, her thesis on the Vulcans, her theory about the Human and Vulcan link; and beyond this idea nothing matters, believe me."

"I wonder," answered the Captain, looking doubtful. "I can't help thinking that her insistence on examining Spock in the nude means more than just a thirst for knowledge."

"I think you're wrong, Jim. I'm sure she regards Spock only as an object of investigation, as though he were, say... a fragment of

bone, or a fossilised skull, to be scanned and dissected in a laboratory. You see, the trouble with some of these clever scientists is that sometimes they focus on their subject to the exclusion of anything else, and their minds become warped, and tend to obsession, or idea fixed. That's probably what's happening to Dr. Starkis, Jim."

"Whatever it is, Bones, at the first opportunity I'll talk to her and give her a piece of my mind. I won't have a daft prehistorian upset my ship."

"Well, it gives your crew some entertainment, anyway. Chapel tells me they're having a ball with the Spock/Starkis contest. They keep scores on a board in the rec room, and have even started making wagers."

"Good god, Bones, it's not a game! It concerns Spock."

"Sure it does. That's why I've come to warn you about it. And now," added McCoy, getting to his feet, "what about some lunch? I'm ravenous. Want to join me, Jim?"

"Good idea. Give me time to put on my uniform, and I'll be right with you."

As soon as the Captain and the doctor walked into the officers' mess they felt that the atmosphere was rather stormy. A few officers were having lunch at the various tables, but their attention was focused on a table where a heated discussion was in progress.

Suzan Starkis, her tray of food untouched in front of her, was loudly arguing with Mr. Spock, who, apparently unconcerned by her vehemence, was quietly eating his meal, occasionally putting in a word in his usual restrained tone.

McCoy said to Kirk in a low voice, "There you are, Jim - Suzie is on the rampage. Here is your opportunity."

Both went to the food dispensers, ordered their lunch, and carried their trays casually to the table where the two scientists were sitting. Chekov, seated beside the Vulcan, saw them approach with relief. His young face expressed both irritation and uneasiness; obviously the sight of his senior officer being harassed by the prehistorian was upsetting him very much indeed.

Jim Kirk, setting his tray down, said pleasantly, "Hello. Mind if we join you?", and on the "Please do, Captain," from Spock, sat down, followed by McCoy.

Miss Starkis, at first surprised by the interruption, gave a brief "Hello, Captain... Doctor," and resumed her argument. "... so you cannot deny, Mr. Spock, that Homo Sapiens and Homo Vulcanis have so many similarities that this can only be explained by a common trunk; and I tell you, we have found the proof of a common origin on Terra. What do you say to that?" And leaning forward she stared defiantly at Spock.

His friends held their breath, watching his reaction. Spock quietly took a sip of his fruit juice, then steadily scrutinised the young woman, head tilted, eyebrow raised.

"Dr. Starkis," he said finally, "we have already discussed the matter many times, but since you insist let me remind you once more that the dissimilarities outweigh the similarities to such an extent that the probability of Humans and Vulcans coming from the same stock is zero. As you are aware, Vulcan physiology is comparable to Romulan, Rigellian, and that of a few lesser-known peoples, but certainly not to Human." This statement was pronounced in a quiet and peremptory way to cut short further argument, but the prehistorian, undaunted, persisted.

"Nonsense!" she said with a snort. "I know better. We have the proof that we are right."

"Fascinating," murmured Spock.

"What's fascinating, Spock?" put in the doctor, playing dumb.

"The fact, Doctor, that Humans, even though they are wrong, are so often convinced that they are right. This never fails to surprise me."

"How can you tell, Mr. Spock, since you haven't seen the proof?" asked the girl.

"True, Miss Starkis, but your proof is not scientifically valid, and you know that. A fragment of jaw bone, a section of cranium, without a substantial context such as artifacts, for example, are not sufficient data to support a theory. And do not forget other evidence; you have not taken into account the biological facts."

"Therefore you *must* allow me to examine you. How can I test my theory and check my work if I cannot do so?" she demanded.

The Vulcan stood up slowly, and looking down at the pestering girl replied coolly, "I refuse for two reasons, madam. First, any test or measure taken on me would be useless, for I am not fully Vulcan, therefore the results would be inaccurate. Second, I wish you to understand that I am not a fossilised specimen of laboratory material to be pinned and dissected under a microscope at will. And now, if you will excuse me, I have work to do. Mr. Chekov, if you have finished, shall we go?"

"Yes, sir," replied the young officer eagerly, delighted to see Spock score over Dr. Starkis again.

Both men went out, with a nod of farewell, followed by most of the others, leaving Kirk and McCoy to the company of the prehistorian. She looked utterly disheartened, and spitefully pushed away her tray.

McCoy, good soul, could almost feel sorry for her, she looked so disappointed; she was probably not used to being crossed. He got to his feet. "Anybody care for coffee? Jim? Miss Starkis?"

"Yes, please," she answered absently.

Once they were served the two friends exchanged a glance over their cups, then the Captain, addressing his guest, tried to make her understand that her behaviour was not much appreciated on the ship.

"I know you think it is important for your career, but believe

me, Miss Starkis, you cannot do here what you would do in your lab, or on an excavation site. You are on a Starship. I regret to say that since you have been with us you have interfered with ship's protocol, especially in regard to my First Officer, whom I need at peak efficiency. So I ask you not to disturb him any more. He has given you all possible information about Vulcans, hasn't he? Now please, leave him alone."

"But Captain," she argued, "that information, though valuable, is not sufficient. What I need now, to complete my thesis, is an essential investigation of Mr. Spock."

"You're forgetting one thing," Kirk said sharply. "As he just told you, Mr. Spock is not a guinea pig, he is a man. Consider his feelings, please!"

"His feelings, Captain?" The prehistorian looked astonished. "But he is a Vulcan, and everyone know that Vulcans have no feelings, no emotions."

McCoy, glancing at Kirk, noticed that he was trying to keep his temper before answering. At last, taking a deep breath, the Captain said, "Don't you believe it, Dr. Starkis. I don't know where you got that information, but it is totally wrong. Vulcans do have emotions, but they have been trained from childhood to conceal, to suppress them. We know through experience that Mr. Spock has very strong emotions indeed behind his impassive front - he is half Human, after all - but his Vulcan education forbids him to display them as we do."

Dr. McCoy, watching Suzan, noticed that she looked rather perplexed, so to reinforce Kirk's arguments, and out of sheer mischief, added his advice. "The Captain is quite right, Miss Starkis, and let me warn you to be very careful with Mr. Spock. He is usually calm and patient, but if he was provoked he might blow up, and believe me, Vulcans in a rage can be violent, even dangerous. The Captain here won't contradict me, will you, Jim? Remember your fight with Spock when we were on Omicron Ceti III?"

"Sure I do! I still feel it in my bones," replied Kirk with a grin.

But to their dismay their attempt to frighten Miss Starkis produced the contrary result. She exclaimed with rapture, "But this is fantastic! This is more than I could have hoped for! The primitive Vulcan, the barbaric Homo Vulcanis, reappearing under the veneer of centuries of civilisation. I wish I could see that. Spock in a rage! It would be wonderful. Thank you, gentlemen, for this information." And she walked briskly away, leaving the two men dumbfounded.

Then Kirk turned to McCoy. "We only needed that!" he groaned. "Now see what you've done, Bones - made matters worse."

The doctor looked crestfallen. "It seems I have indeed bungled, Jim. I'm sorry. What now? What do you think she's up to?"

"I don't know. She's so unpredictable. I know what I'll do, though - I'll pass the word never to let Suzie have more than five minutes with Spock. She's likely to provoke him for the fun of it, to test his reactions, so we have to neutralise her somehow. See what I mean?"

"Perfectly, Jim. That's a great idea. We'll form a league for the protection of the Vulcan."

On his way to the bridge Jim Kirk passed by the rec room to check on the information McCoy had given him. He found the large room rather crowded, as a shift had just come off duty. The usual activities, games, music, etc. were under way, but the Captain noticed a large group engaged in warm discussion and laughter. He walked up to them, exchanging a word or a nod of the head on the way, and saw, fixed to the bulkhead, a large board on which were inscribed two sets of figures, one headed by the inscription Mr. S., the other by the word Visitor.

As Kirk stopped and stared at the board his presence was noticed, and the merry party fell silent.

"Tell me," asked the Captain, "what is the meaning of this board?"

The crewmembers looked sheepish and rather confused.

"Well?" insisted Kirk. "I'm waiting for an answer. What is all this?"

Lt. Farel, a serious-looking man in his forties who was in charge of the personnel department, cleared his throat. "Sorry, Captain. This is where we keep the scores up to date for the match. You see, on the left are the figures for Mr. Spock, on the right those for Dr. Starkis."

"I see," said Kirk reflectively. "And if I read the figures correctly, Mr. Spock leads by 7 to 4."

"Of course, Captain," chorused the female members of the group. "And he'll win the match," added one.

"Let's hope so. And how is the betting going, Mr. Farel?"

"Fairly well, Captain. We already have 152 entries, and most of them are on Mr. Spock, of course."

"Oh? Are there some people betting on the visitor?"

"Yes, Captain, a few have decided to try their luck on Miss Starkis. Lt. Karanovitz, of Engineering, for example, has bet a bottle of whisky with Mr. Scott."

"They would," commented Kirk, shaking his head, bringing giggles from the group, which had grown considerably since he had arrived.

It was just then that a young man in the red tunic of Security came running in and elbowed his way through the group, shouting, "Hey, fellows, do you know Suzie's latest stunt...?" But at the sight of the Captain the poor boy stopped short and turned pale. "Captain! he stammered, drawing himself to attention.

"Well, Mr. Stevens," Kirk drawled ironically, "don't keep us waiting. Speak up, man."

The Security man swallowed nervously. "Yes, sir. I... I have

to report that Su... I mean Dr. Starkis - tried to corner Mr. Spock in the turbolift, but Mr. Chekov came in and spiked her guns, sir."

Cheers and laughter greeted the news.

"Now, now," said Kirk, looking around sternly, "not so loud, please." When the uproar had subsided he went on, "I have a good mind to forbid this game, which is not worthy of a Starfleet crew."

There was a chorus of protest. "Oh, no, Captain, please don't!" entreated an attractive fair-haired girl, an ensign in the Science Section, who pleaded with a sweet smile, "Please, Captain, give us your permission. We're having so much fun."

Looking into her beseeching sky-blue eyes, Kirk relented and surrendered gracefully. "All right," he decided, "I see no harm after all in you making your bets, but on no account must it interfere with your duties, understand? I rely on you, Mr. Farel, to keep all this under control."

"Certainly, Captain. Thank you."

"Oh, and one more thing," added Kirk seriously. "This has to be done with caution. I don't want Mr. Spock, or even our guest, to be aware of your... ah... illicit activities."

"Excuse me, Captain," put in the pretty blonde, "but Mr. Spock already knows about it."

"Damn! Who told him?"

"Well, we were here last night, Captain, Coploa, Armstrong and myself, looking at the scores, when Mr. Spock happened to pass by and wanted to know what we were doing. Naturally we had to tell him - you know how it is, Captain."

"I know, Ensign," replied Kirk with a wry smile - Spock had the knack for extracting the truth from reluctant culprits. "And what did he say?"

"He said," replied the girl, giving a fair imitation of the Vulcan's tilt of eyebrow and intonation, "he said, 'Let me tell you, Ensign, that this type of entertainment is totally illogical.' But," she went on with a dazzling smile, "he also said we could carry on."

Kirk threw up his hands in mock surrender. "If Mr. Spock says so, then carry on." And he left the room followed by a chorus of "Thank you, Captain."

Once in the turbolift, however, he wondered whether he had been right to let his crew get on with it. On the other hand, this was an entertaining pastime during a rather boring trip, and his passenger would probably never hear of it. As for Spock, he had obviously accepted in his usual philosophical mood this new evidence of Human vagary. Whatever his Vulcan foibles, Spock was a good sport. When the turbolift deposited the Captain on the bridge he had come to the conclusion that he had, after all, made the right decision.

Kirk had barely stepped out of the lift when his First Officer stood up with graceful ease from the command chair, reported briefly on the ship's status, then after acknowledging his Captain's "Thank

you, Mr. Spock," went to his station, passed on the way by Chekov, who returned to the navigation console. This smooth exchange of posts never failed to amuse Kirk, who was proud of the efficiency of his officers.

As Chekov walked past the command chair Kirk beckoned and said in a low voice, "Good work, Mr. Chekov."

The young man, surprised, looked at him inquiringly. "Captain?"

"In the turbolift," murmured Kirk with a knowing look.

His boyish face pink with pleasure, Chekov replied smartly, "Thank you, Captain," then took his place.

Kirk stood up and walked leisurely to the upper walkway, to stop finally at Spock's science station.

"Captain?" asked the Vulcan, looking up.

"Spock, I'm short of a training bout in the gym; we haven't worked out since we left Starbase 6. Would you care to meet me tomorrow morning for a session?"

Spock stared at his Captain, and for a brief and precious moment the two friends shared their thoughts in their unique companionship. Then Spock said quietly, "Yes. thank you, Captain, I would like to."

"Will 6.30 be convenient?" asked Kirk.

"Perfectly."

"Right, 6.30 it will be, then." And the Captain, returning to his chair, sat down and started dictating the log of the day.

The next morning Dr. McCoy, having come on duty, was perusing the night's reports when his office door opened and Kirk walked in stiffly, slumping in a chair with a groan.

"Good lord!" exclaimed McCoy. "What's wrong, Jim? Did you fall out of bed?"

"Give me a pain killer, Bones - I feel as though I've been flattened by a steamroller!"

"And have you?" inquired the doctor with interest, as he shot an analgesic into the Captain's arm.

"Almost," complained Kirk. "I was practising V'Asumi with Spock this morning, and by god, it's never been so tough!"

"V'Asumi, indeed! I'm surprised you haven't broken something," commented McCoy wryly. "That Vulcan cross between kung fu, karate and French boxing is worse than a steamroller, Jim - it's murder!"

"Not when it's done with restraint, Bones, the way Spock usually does it to spare me. But this morning... I don't know what came over him, but all of a sudden all his strength, all his power were unleashed. I've never felt anything like it."

"You could have been badly hurt," his friend said with concern. "You know Spock's fantastic strength, how deadly it can be."

"I know, but I thought it would be a good idea to have this V'Asumi session with Spock to ease the tension and take his mind off Starkis, but I never imagined she would come and watch us."

"What! This early in the morning she found her way to the gym?"

"She did, Bones. When we arrived there were quite a few people already there, and of course when we started the bout we soon had an audience watching us. Suddenly I saw Miss Starkis push her way to the front row, and there she was, staring at us through her glasses. It was pretty irritating, I can tell you."

"I can imagine," replied McCoy knowingly. "And that's when Spock went berserk, I presume?"

"Quite right. He started to fight with killing force, as if in a rage. All I could do was to ward him off as best I could; finally he got me flat on the mat with both arms locked behind me and my neck caught in his grip."

"Good god!"

"Then, I don't know how, I managed to gasp 'Spock, stop it', and that did it. He let go at once, and since I couldn't move he helped me up and stood holding me, giving me time to catch my breath. I looked at his face, and believe me, Bones, I've never seen him so angry. He was livid."

"No wonder," commented McCoy. "he had just realised what a close thing it had been."

"Probably. But we can't blame him. He was beside himself because of that damned woman. Well, after a while I was able to stand by myself, so we retired in good order to the dressing room; then Spock brought me here. And do you know, Bones, he managed to ignore Suzie all the time, though she was staring after him with such a rapt look, as though he was the god Pan in the flesh. It's incredible."

"Well," drawled McCoy, "she got what she wanted, to see Spock in a rage. With that display of sheer male power, small wonder she was impressed."

"But she's the cause. I can see now that her ceaseless interference upsets Spock, and I don't want that. Trouble is, I don't know how to stop her, short of shoving her in the brig for the rest of the trip."

"I'm sure the Federation wouldn't appreciate that," McCoy laughed, then turning serious again, "Do you know, Jim, one thing puzzled me. How come Suzie always happens to be there, at the right time? I mean, she seems to know exactly where Spock is and what he's doing. Remember her appearance in the lab, then in sickbay, and in the gym this morning? How did she know that you and Spock were to meet in the gym for V'Asumi? This is more than mere coincidence."

"Yes, indeed," mused the Captain. "Now you mention it, Bones,

it is strange."

The two friends stared thoughtfully at each other.

"You know what I think, Jim?" said McCoy darkly. "There must be a traitor among us."

"Come on" protested Kirk. "Who in the crew would work against Spock? On the contrary, they all do their best to neutralise Starkis, and of course they want him to win the match."

"Are you sure, Jim? What about those who wagered on Suzie? Look at the evidence."

"By god, I think you may be right. That would be a good reason. I'll make some discreet enquiries in that direction. Thank you for the suggestion, Bones; that was well observed."

"Elementary, my dear Watson," replied McCoy smugly. "And if you're going," he went on, seeing Kirk get up and walk to the door, "remember you've been hurt, so you'd better take it easy."

"I'll be all right, Bones. Actually, I feel fine now, thanks to your medication. I'll just go and change, then go to the bridge. But first I'd better look in at Spock's quarters and see how he's doing. See you later."

After he had freshened up and changed, the captain went next door and sounded the buzzer. The door slid open silently; it was never locked, according to Vulcan custom.

Kirk walked in, immediately oppressed by the high temperature of the room, and stopped, blinking in the dim light. "Spock?" he called.

"Here, Captain," answered the deep voice, and turning around Kirk saw his First Officer come through the doorway from the sleeping quarters. He had donned the dark velour cloak with Vulcan symbols which he wore for meditation. Kirk reflected how different he looked in that attire, an alien from another world, parsecs away from the prim Science officer of the Enterprise.

"Sorry, Spock, have I interrupted your meditation?"

"No, Jim, I hadn't begun yet. But you should be resting in your room, or in sickbay. Didn't Dr. McCoy...?"

"McCoy gave me one of his magic potions, so I'm as fit as a fiddle, and on my way to the bridge. But what about you?" Kirk detected a troubled expression in his friend's dark eyes.

Spock hesitated, lowered his head and bit his lip, then said in a low voice, "Jim, I behaved disgracefully this morning. I... I seemed to lose all self control during V'Asumi. I might have killed you..."

Kirk, moved by this unprecedented display of emotion, laid his hand on his friend's shoulder. "But you didn't, Spock; and you know as well as I do you were not yourself this morning."

"That is no excuse. A Vulcan must always control himself. It

is a matter of honour and dignity."

"Spock," Kirk replied fondly, "won't you ever allow that Human part of you to react in a Human way once in a while? There's nothing to be ashamed of in that."

"For a Vulcan there is, Jim," said Spock stubbornly. "What is more, I am liable for a court-martial for striking a superior officer."

"Nonsense!" said the Captain, laughing. "It was a sporting contest, and I *did* strike you as well, didn't I? So we're quits. The point is, however, that suddenly this morning you flared up and became violent, and it had something to do with Dr. Starkis. Or am I wrong?"

"No, Jim, you are quite right. I must confess that the mere presence of Miss Starkis is very disquieting. I usually succeed in protecting myself from people's emotions, but hers are so strong, and have become so disordered lately, that I cannot help being much disturbed. This morning I felt her inquisitiveness become so overpowering that I..."

"You lost your Vulcan patience, Spock, and it's quite understandable. You've all seen how much you've been pestered by this girl, and that's enough to drive anyone crazy. But we only have three more days to go, and then we'll be rid of her. Now, Spock, just rest and relax. I need you at the top of your form. You have another couple of hours off duty, haven't you?"

"One hour and thirty eight minutes, Captain."

"All right, Spock, I don't want to see you before time on the bridge." And with a comforting smile, Kirk departed.

"Thank you, Jim," the Vulcan murmured softly. Then after ritual preparation he composed himself for meditation; gradually, thankfully, his troubled mind recovered its serenity.

In the meantime Suzan Starkis had been collecting information in the gym. After the departure of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, still stupefied by the killing forced the Vulcan had put forth, she had listened eagerly to the excited comments of the crew members about V'Asumi. It seemed that even the Enterprise people had been astonished by their First Officer's demonstration.

So she put in a question or two, and as they seemed quite willing to answer it soon turned into a regular interview. Secretly laughing at her fascination for Mr. Spock, they slyly fed her with the most amazing tales about his exceptional powers, relating with gusto his adventures, and the numerous occasions when he and Captain Kirk had saved the galaxy. Some of the stories were true, though greatly embellished; many were so outrageous that their hero would have been appalled had he known about them.

Dr. Starkis drank it all in, truth and fiction; she was so enthralled that she never realised they were pulling her leg, and when she finally went back to her cabin she was walking on air.

She sat at her desk and feverishly noted down the important information, adding to the already considerable amount of data

she had compiled under the heading 'Homo Vulcanis Spockensis'. This done, she leaned back in her chair and considered her case. In spite of numerous difficulties, and even obstructiveness on the part of the crew, who apart from a few exceptions were very uncooperative - particularly the command crew - she had obtained a reasonable amount of knowledge about the Vulcan. This was satisfactory.

But one important element was still lacking: the direct contact, the verification by personal experiment. She was determined to obtain that at any cost. Her reputation as a scientist was at stake.

She stood up, and perused a document which she had obtained from a helpful junior officer - the roster of the bridge officers. Mr. Spock, she noticed with satisfaction, was not due at his station for another forty minutes. This was her chance!

She quickly collected notebook and pencils, and a small scanner, stowed these in her pocket, and set forth on her quest.

In his quarters Spock, at peace with himself and the world, stood up slowly, stretched, and removed and folded his meditation robe. Then he programmed the laundry dispenser, which immediately delivered a freshly pressed uniform. Spock laid it out on his bed, selected one of his favourite music cassettes, and slipped it into the recorder set in the bulkhead by the bed.

As the rhythmic cadences of Handel's concerto for harp and flute filled the room he stripped and went into the small private bathroom attached to officers' quarters. After a quick shave he stepped behind a partition and turned on the shower taps.

Like most people living in desert lands, Vulcans liked water, and Spock was no exception. He had never cared for sonic showers, preferring to feel the sting of water on his skin. He stood for a long time in the steam and the hot water, letting it splash down on his face and invigorate his limbs, which were stiff from the kneeling posture of meditation. The physical satisfaction, enhanced by the spiritual pleasure of the music, was abruptly marred by a distasteful intrusion.

Despite the pouring water Spock's sharp ears detected a faint sigh behind him, and looking round he perceived through the steam a female face whose eyes, circled by spectacles, were peering at him.

Dr. Starkis - for it was she - had finally gained her ends. She had found her way to the command officers' deck and had easily identified the Vulcan's quarters, between those of the Captain and Chief Engineer Scott.

Hardly giving a thought to her possible reception by Mr. Spock Starkis boldly pressed the door buzzer. She received no answer, but to her great surprise the door slid open silently at a touch. Tentatively she stepped inside, calling out, "Mr. Spock?" Still no reply, only the harmonies of baroque music. She gave a start; behind her the door had slid smoothly shut, and she was trapped in the Vulcan's den.

In spite of her determination she felt a bit nervous, surprised

at the excessive heat and the faint light in the room. She peered around - nobody. Squaring her shoulders she decided that since she was in at last she might as well take a quick look round, for the sake of science. The fact that she was intruding in someone's privacy did not cross her mind in the least.

Mr. Spock's quarters looked quite plain at first glance: Starfleet standard furniture, a desk and some chairs, a computer terminal on the desk, chess board, books and cassettes on the shelf. All this was neat and tidy, but rather disappointing.

On the desk, however, were piled some papers written in Vulcan script, and over by the partition the scientist noted something decidedly alien. Her eyes lit with excitement as she reached out to a musical instrument, a harp or lyre, strangely shaped and beautifully carved. She touched the strings with a finger, producing a melodious 'dzin' which sent a shiver down her spine.

Next, her searching eyes caught the glint of metal on the opposite bulkhead, and there was a handsome display of Vulcan ceremonial weapons which would be the pride of the most fastidious collector. She remembered, of course, that in the past Vulcans had been a race of warriors.

But she got her greatest thrill looking past the latticed partition into the inner room. There, set against red drapes, stood a carving of a beast-like creature, reddened by the flickering flames burning in a small bowl set before it.

Suzan Starkis went in, attracted by its devilish appearance, and pondered on its significance. Was it a symbol of Vulcan, the planet of deserts, volcanoes and torrid heat? It could be. But all this looked so weird, so discordant, on a Starship, especially combined with the classical music that filled the room. What a curious mixture!

At that moment the cassette stopped with a click, and in the ensuing silence she became aware of the sound of running water, and of the blue shirt and black trousers spread out on the bed.

So Spock was at home after all. Dr. Starkis paused briefly, irresolute, then making up her mind she went and pulled the bathroom door open. This was her chance to see at last what a Vulcan body looked like, in the flesh rather than in anatomical diagrams.

Bold as brass she walked in and peered round the partition - and there he was, a thin, muscular figure streaming with water.

Unfortunately her satisfaction was short-lived. Almost immediately her sight became blurred by the steam fogging her glasses; as she removed them to wipe them clean the shower was suddenly turned off.

Mr. Spock, assaulted by a surge of Human emotions, hastily raised his mental shields, and by means of Vulcan discipline recovered from the unpleasant shock. In one motion he turned off the taps and grabbed a towel, which he wrapped around his hips. Then he turned to face the intruder.

"Would you please tell me what you are doing in my bathroom, Dr. Starkis?" asked the deep baritone voice.

The young woman, still holding her glasses, blinked up at his stern face shortsightedly. "Oh, Mr. Spock," she stammered uneasily, "I was looking for you. I have to see..."

"There is nothing to see here, Miss Starkis." And the Vulcan deftly took away her glasses and put them on a shelf.

"Oh, don't!" she cried. "I need my glasses. I can hardly see without them." As she groped blindly her hands met a warm and wet male chest, and she gasped in a flutter, "Oh! You're here."

"Obviously," replied Spock, stepping backwards, "and let me point out that *my* being here is logical, but *your* being here is not."

"But Mr. Spock," she argued, recovering her spirits, "you must let me..."

She moved forward, hands thrust out, but all of a sudden she felt her wrists caught in a vice-like grip, her neck grasped by a wet hand, and she barely managed to squeal, "Mr. Spock! What are you doing?" before she lost consciousness.

Spock, having applied the neck pinch with his customary skill, caught up his unwelcome visitor and carried her into the bedroom. Looking around, he first meant to put her on the bed, but thought better of it. Through recurring experience he could imagine McCoy's sarcastic comments on finding the woman on his bed.

Instead he carried her through to the study area and finally put her down on the carpet. He touched her neck, feeling her pulse; satisfied, he straightened, then looking down at the maddening girl he let out a string of Vulcan curses, clear evidence of his exasperation.

As he was still wet, Spock fetched another towel, and while drying himself flicked on the intercom on his desk.

"Sickbay. Dr. McCoy, please."

A pleasant face appeared on the screen and a female voice answered, "The doctor is not here at the moment, Mr. Spock. Can I help you?"

Remembering in time his near nudity, Spock hastily stepped back out of range of the viewer.

"Yes... ah... Nurse Chapel. Would you please send two medics with a stretcher to my quarters. There is a casualty."

"Oh, Mr. Spock, are you hurt? Is it serious?"

"It is not serious, Nurse, and I am not the casualty. It is for Dr. Starkis."

"What!" exclaimed Christine Chapel, changing tone. "I'll come immediately. Oh, that woman!"

Spock merely raised an eyebrow as the screen went blank, hastily finished towelling himself, and slipped on a bathrobe which he fastened tightly at the waist.

Nurse Chapel made such haste with her stretcher bearers that the Vulcan was still drying his hair when his door opened and his room was invaded by a breathless Chapel, two medics charging in with an anti-grav litter, and finally by Dr. McCoy, who had just caught up with them.

"Spock! What's this I hear? What happened?" snapped the doctor; then seeing the scientist on the deck, "Blast! What have you done to Suzie, Spock?"

Chapel, already on her knees and scanning the unconscious girl, said briefly, "She's all right, Doctor. Just a faint, that's all."

"But how come, Spock?" insisted McCoy.

"Well, Doctor, it seems that Dr. Starkis entered my cabin while I was having a shower, and..."

"What!" interrupted the doctor with glee. "Are you telling me that she succeeded at last? She saw you in the altogether? No wonder she passed out!"

Spock, an image of stoic dignity, replied coolly, "You are in error, Doctor. She could not see me," and handed him Starkis' glasses, still covered with steam.

"Oh, I see!" chuckled McCoy, "With or without her glasses, she could hardly see you. This is damn funny. But what made her black out?"

"I am afraid," replied the Vulcan with some diffidence, "that Miss Starkis' scientific interest in my person was becoming... ah... excessive, even invasive, so I had to take drastic measures..."

"And you neutralised her with your Vulcan neck pinch, I gather," concluded McCoy.

"Precisely, Doctor. I trust she will not suffer too much from the shock."

"Don't worry, Spock, if she gets a stiff neck it serves her right. Barging into people's privacy like that! Take her away, Christine, and give her a sedative when she comes round, so that we can get some peace for a while."

"If I had my way," said the nurse crossly, "I'd give her an emetic - that would teach her! Come on, you two," she said to her assistants, who had placed the patient on the stretcher, "stop giggling, and let's go."

Once they had gone McCoy said to Spock, with a nod at the door, "She's taking it mighty badly, I'm afraid. To trespass on your privacy is considered very bad taste, you know. Imagine what the female crew will think about it. Anyway, you've won this round, Spock, and I know a number of people on board who'll have a party. Too bad I missed my chance to wager on you."

Mr. Spock, picking up a warm undershirt from a drawer, retorted with disapproval, "I will never understand why Humans waste time and money on gambling games. It seems to be such a useless and illogical occupation."

McCoy, on his way out, looked back and could not help

laughing. The sight of the First Officer, scantily clad in a black bathrobe, tousle-headed and bare footed, solemnly discoursing on the logic of gambling, was too much for the doctor, who declared, shaking his head,

"You pointy-eared Vulcan! You really are a queer fish. You've just been assaulted by a girl in your bathroom, and here you are, cool as a cucumber. Anybody else would be in a flutter."

"That is the advantage of being a Vulcan, Doctor. Now, if you will excuse me, I must resume duty on the bridge in 6.8 minutes."

"Okay, Spock, I'm leaving - I have to look after your victim now. But wait 'till Jim hears about this! He'll get a kick out of it."

Actually, Captain Kirk and the bridge crew already knew about it. The tale had raced over the ship like a forest fire. Uhura had received an intra-ship call at her station.

"What did you say?" she exclaimed, startled. "Oh, no! You're kidding! She never... What?" and she began to giggle helplessly.

Surprised by such behaviour, Captain Kirk swivelled his chair and looked up. "Lieutenant! What is the matter with you?"

"Sorry, Captain," she said, trying to regain her composure. "I've just had a report that Dr. Starkis went into Mr. Spock's quarters while he was in his shower."

"Good god!" said Kirk, standing up. "This is going too far."

"I told ye, Captain," put in Mr. Scott grimly, "this woman is a terror."

"Wait - wait!" cried Uhura, her eyes sparkling with glee. "Do you know what he did? He put her out with a neck pinch."

The bridge rocked with laughter. "Three cheers for Mr. Spock!" cried the irrepressible Chekov. Sulu, his pleasant face grinning from ear to ear, declared, "Really, you can't beat our Spock. he's won the match." Even Kirk, though rather concerned for his friend, couldn't refrain from a chuckle. He sat down again and tried to restore order.

"Now, please, this isn't the rec room. Mr. Spock has reacted appropriately to an awkward situation, but he's due back here any minute now, and I don't want him upset by our behaviour, understand?"

The officers resumed their duties, not without a whisper or a giggle here and there, but when, right on time, the turbolift doors parted to reveal the First Officer, the bridge had recovered its customary efficiency.

Ignoring the glances of his shipmates Spock, as groomed and immaculate as ever, strode along the upper deck to his station.

"Ah, Mr. Spock," the Captain called cheerfully. "Will you take the con, please?"

"Of course, Captain," said the Vulcan, stepping down to the lower bridge.

Standing up, Kirk said casually, "By the way, Spock, I heard about a certain... incident a while ago."

"Incident, Captain?" asked Spock, deadpan.

"Yes indeed. An... intrusion into your quarters. I hope this inconvenience has been settled satisfactorily?" asked the Captain, looking at Spock meaningfully.

The two friends exchanged a glance of silent understanding, then Spock replied quietly, "Indeed, Captain. Everything is under control now."

"Glad to hear it - and congratulations on a very efficient move. You have the con." And Kirk disappeared into the turbolift.

Spock quietly eased himself into the command chair, looked around and, surprised to be the focus of undivided attention, inquired with lifted eyebrow, "Anything wrong, gentlemen?"

"On the contrary, Mr. Spock," beamed Uhura, "everything is great. Forgive me for mentioning it, but we concur with the Captain. Congratulations."

The Vulcan face remained impassive, but a quiver of the stern mouth, a gleam in the dark eyes, told his shipmates that Spock was more moved than he would like to admit by their smiling approval and their loyalty.

At about the same time, in sickbay, a very distressed lady was coming round and moaning softly.

"Where am I? What happened to me? Oh... my head!"

Nurse Chapel, holding her wrist, was taking her pulse. She said dryly to her patient, "You're in sickbay, Dr. Starkis, safe and sound, but a little bruised - which is only normal after what happened."

Suzan blinked, and whispered weakly, "You're Nurse Chapel, aren't you? I feel awful... Why? What happened?"

"Don't you remember?"

"No... Oh, I feel so sick! I think I was... I was.. with Spock..." Suddenly she recovered her memory and squeaked, "Oh, my god! He grabbed my hands and... and my neck! That's all I can remember. Oh dear! What did he do to me?"

Christine Chapel could not resist teaching a lesson to this person who had so plagued her beloved Vulcan, so, keeping a straight face, she replied, "What could you expect, going to a gentleman's room uninvited? You were warned, weren't you? Vulcans, when they are infuriated, can turn brutal, and you took a great risk harrying Mr. Spock as you did. You only have yourself to blame, after all."

Suzan Starkis was appalled by what this speech implied. "Oh my god!" she repeated tearfully. "What happened to me? What did he

do?"

Dr. McCoy, coming in, sat down by her bed and took her hands. "Come now, my dear, don't take it so badly, and please keep calm. Nurse," he went on with a mock scowl at his assistant, "I'm surprised at you! This isn't exactly a good bedside manner."

Chapel turned round with a shrug and began to prepare the hypo and sedative.

McCoy, at the obvious distress of his patient, felt sorry for her, so patting her hand he said kindly, "Take it easy, my dear, you'll feel better in a moment. Just relax. However, I don't see why you should worry, after all. Only yesterday you told us that your dearest wish was to see the male savagery of Vulcan unleashed, remember. You should be glad you did."

Miss Starkis apparently misunderstood the doctor, for his words upset her even more. "Doctor," she said tragically, "tell me what he did! I have to know. Tell me the worst - I can take it."

McCoy stared at her, aghast. "Good lord! What do you imagine? That Spock would...?" He shot a glance at Chapel, who was standing ready with the hypo and sniggering openly; then, trying to keep a straight face, he declared,

"Listen, Miss Starkis, I believe you are labouring under a misapprehension. Spock, for all his terrific strength, would not hurt a fly. As for what I believe you're thinking he's a Vulcan, and you are as safe with him as with an iceberg. I guess you had him cornered in the shower, and you should know, since you've studied Vulcans, that they hate physical contact because they are touch telepaths. So, if you touched Spock... You did, didn't you?" She assented wordlessly. "That's it, then. When you touched Spock he fended you off and stunned you with the Vulcan neck pinch. Though it's rather unpleasant, it is perfectly harmless."

"Really?" Starkis asked, surprised and relieved. "That's what it was? Just a neck pinch?"

"Nothing else, my dear, you can be sure of that. He called us to bring you here, and even gave me your spectacles. Here they are."

"Oh, I'm so thankful!" whispered the young woman feebly, and tears of relief came to her eyes. The self-confident scientist who had come on board expecting to have everything her own way had turned into a helpless and mortified girl.

"Well," said the doctor kindly, "let that be a lesson to you. In the future leave Spock alone. Now you need a rest, so we'll give you a mild sedative and you'll be fine. And don't cry, my dear, there's no reason to be upset. On the contrary - you saw Spock in the shower, you got the neck pinch. I know lots of girls on the ship who would give the moon to be in your place."

Miss Starkis shook her head with a pitiful smile. "Yes, but I hardly saw him at all because of the steam, and then I fainted. All for nothing. But you're sure it was just a neck pinch, Doctor?"

"Positive," replied McCoy, shooting the drug into her arm.

"Too bad," murmured his patient in a sleepy voice, and promptly

fell asleep.

McCoy checked her with his scanner, then straightening up declared, "She'll be all right. Poor girl, that was quite a shock she got. Do you know what, Christine? I think she's disappointed Spock only gave her a neck pinch."

Chapel shot a withering look at the sleeping woman. "I wouldn't be surprised, Doctor," she snapped.

"Jim, I asked you to come to my quarters because we'll be more private than in my office." Dr. McCoy carefully poured some precious smuggled Romulan ale into two tumblers and handed one to the Captain.

"Problem, Bones?"

"Yeah. It's about Starkis. She has had a shock, and doesn't seem to be recovering."

"You mean the aftermath of the nerve pinch? I know from experience it gives you quite a hangover, but she seems strong enough."

"I don't mean a physical sequel, but a mental, a psychological shock."

Kirk shrugged carelessly. "She asked for it, didn't she?"

"She certainly did, but this is serious, Jim, and I can't let her go on like that. I've kept her in sickbay, but I don't quite know what to do. She refuses any food, hardly answers when spoken to, and has frequent bouts of tears for no apparent reason. That girl's personality has totally changed, Jim - you wouldn't recognise her. If we don't do something she's heading for a nervous breakdown."

"Damn! That's all we needed," complained Kirk. "She's given us problems from the start, and now this. What's the cause of this crisis, Bones? Do you think that her obsession with Spock...?"

"I'm not sure, Jim, but I assume that her fixation has undergone a certain transformation. Until now she considered our Vulcan only as a scientific subject. Well, I guess that she had some sort of revelation when she saw him out of uniform and undressed. For the first time he appeared to her no longer as a Starfleet officer, or as a specimen to be studied, but as a man of flesh and blood. She got the full impact of his Vulcan masculinity, Jim."

"Come on, Bones! A few days ago you said that she didn't care for Spock, and now you come and tell me that she has fallen for him, just like that."

"No, not quite. It's more subtle than that. From her behaviour I think that she's remorseful, even ashamed of the manner in which she has treated Spock. It's also possible, however, that she was unconsciously attracted to him, and that all those scientific pretences were just eyewash. Who knows? Anyhow, this complete change of feeling has affected her, and unless we act fast she won't be joining the team of Beryl IV; it'll be the nursing home

on Starbase 6 for her, and long psychotherapy."

"Well," replied the Captain after a pause for thought, "I never imagined that this so bossy scientist would be so vulnerable. Actually, the only one who was right, who saw deeper than we did, was Spock."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, Bones. After our deplorable exhibition in the gym he admitted to being badly upset by her violent emotions, and said that he sensed some sort of psychic disorder. That's why he did his best to avoid her."

"No wonder!"

"All right, Bones, what do we do about her? What do you suggest?"

McCoy emptied his glass and frowned, undecided; then making up his mind he said diffidently, "Well, Jim, I thought that perhaps Spock..."

"What!" exclaimed his friend. "You can't expect that Spock, after all he's already been through with Starkis..."

"Yes, Jim, I see you've got my point. It would be very painful for Spock, I agree, but he's the only person who can break through her mental blocks. You know he's done wonders in the past."

"Sure, but think of the danger. We can't ask him."

"Can't we, Jim? All the medication I've tried has produced no result whatsoever, so if you have any other suggestions...?"

"Well, you're the doctor, not me; you should know."

"As a doctor, therefore, I prescribe a Vulcan mind meld. I'm afraid there's no other way."

Kirk got to his feet abruptly and started pacing restlessly. McCoy, arms folded on his chest, watched him with tense attention, knowing better than to press his point. The Captain had to come to his decision in his own way.

Finally Kirk went to the desk and switched on the intercom. "Bridge? Mr. Spock, please."

"Right away, Captain."

"Spock here," came the deep voice of the Vulcan.

"Mr. Spock, will you come down to Dr. McCoy's quarters, please? We have a bit of a problem under discussion, and we need your opinion."

"On my way, Captain."

With a deep sigh Kirk threw himself into a chair and nervously drummed his fingers on the desk, glancing dubiously at the doctor.

"And now what? Will you tell him?"

"I think it'll take both of us to ask him, Jim."

A few minutes went by, then the First Officer came in quietly, refused the glass of alcohol offered by the doctor, sat down and gazed enquiringly at the two men. They looked at each other, then the Captain began.

"Spock, we do have a problem, and it seems you're the only man to solve it. McCoy, will you explain?"

McCoy, a little embarrassed by the scrutiny of the Vulcan's dark eyes, cleared his throat. "Well," he began, "I won't beat about the bush..."

"Why should you, Doctor? What bush?" inquired the puzzled First Officer.

"You elfin Vulcanis so-and-so!" spluttered McCoy. "You know very well what I mean."

The 'Vulcanis so-and-so', fascinated by the ease with which he could bait the irascible doctor, replied steadily, "If I knew what you meant, Doctor, I would not waste time asking you about it. But please, come to the point. It is about Dr. Starkis, I presume?"

Relieved and surprised, McCoy restrained his battling mood. "How did you guess?"

"Vulcans never guess: they observe and logically deduce, Doctor. Actually, I suspected Miss Starkis' predicament."

"How could you tell, Spock?" asked the Captain.

"I have sensed it for the past few days, as I told you, Jim. When she touched me I received the full shock of her mental instability. Therefore, to prevent myself being overwhelmed by her unbalanced emotionalism, I resorted to the neck pinch. I regret I could not do otherwise."

"I knew it!" cried the doctor. "I knew that was what happened. Of course you could not do otherwise, but Suzie received the backlash, and now..."

"Certainly, Bones," said Kirk, "but on the other hand, I think this settles the problem. We can't ask him to do it - it's out of the question."

"Dammit, Jim, it looks like it. Still, I don't see what else we could do."

Both men stared speculatively at the Vulcan, who raised a quizzical eyebrow and asked, "Perhaps you would be good enough to tell me what the matter is?"

McCoy leaned forward and spoke earnestly. "Okay, Spock. Miss Starkis is in a fix, and I thought you could help her with a mind meld."

"Obviously I shall have to play the doctor's part," said Spock dryly.

"You caused the damage," McCoy said unfairly, "the least you can do is try and put it right. And anyway, all this wouldn't have

happened if you had locked your door like anyone else."

"Really, Doctor," replied his favourite antagonist, "your propensity for speculating about what might have happened if events which happened had not happened is both illogical and useless. What is done is done."

Kirk intervened and cut short the doctor's hot retort. "Enough, you two! This is no time for your squabbles. Bones, you know we can't blame Spock if Starkis didn't know that Vulcans never lock their doors. In any case, she had no right to go into his bathroom in the first place. Now, Spock, your answer?"

The First Officer, his dark eyes fixed on his Captain's, remained deep in thought for a brief moment, while his two friends watched him silently. At last he took a deep breath and said soberly,

"I will perform the mind meld, Jim. I know it is my duty. But with a reservation, however. It must be explained to Dr. Starkis what a mind meld is, and she must accept it willingly. I cannot force my way into her mind without her agreement. It would be, you understand, against the Vulcan code of honour and ethics."

"Quite," Kirk agreed. "But have you thought about the risks to your own mind, Spock? Won't it endanger your sanity?"

"It will be quite arduous, but I think I can manage."

"Don't worry, Jim," put in the doctor. "I'll monitor Spock all the time, and if I see something wrong with either of them we'll snap him out of it in a trice."

"All right," the Captain said. "Bones, it's up to you now to tell your patient about it."

"I'll go and see her right away, and I'll let you know when she's ready."

"Very good, Doctor," replied Spock, standing up and going to the door. "I shall be on the bridge when you need me."

"Thank you, Spock. You know, you don't look it, but you are a brick."

The First Officer turned round looking suspicious, and Kirk could not help laughing at his perplexed expression.

"Come along, Spock," he said, taking his arm. "I'll tell you what it means on the way to the bridge. It is a compliment, you know."

Some time later the three men met again in sickbay where Suzan Starkis had been staying since her mishap.

She was ready to undergo the mind meld, thanks to McCoy's and Chapel's persuasion. They had specially stressed the fact that she would have a unique experience of Vulcan mental techniques. She had accepted, providing that the doctor, the nurse, and even the Captain would be present. She now dreaded being alone with Spock, but it was hard to tell whether that was out of fear, or shame. Her

feelings towards the Vulcan had changed radically, from a purely professional interest to something more subtle she could not yet fathom.

So Suzan was waiting with some misgivings, holding Nurse Chapel's hand tightly. Kirk noted with some surprise that Chapel was all compassion now; her female jealousy had turned into understanding and sympathy.

When Spock silently walked in McCoy, in a fatherly gesture, put his hand on Starkis' shoulder to comfort her.

"Here is Spock, my dear. He's come to help you. You'll see, everything will be fine." Then, turning to the Vulcan, "She's ready for you, Spock."

"Thank you, Doctor. Miss Chapel, if you please?"

"Yes, of course, Mr. Spock," replied Chapel, stepping away from Suzan, who was reluctant to let her go. With a warm smile to the girl she joined Kirk and McCoy, leaving Spock and Dr. Starkis face to face.

The Captain had quite often witnessed the Vulcan mind meld performed by Spock on sentient beings, animals, even on machines. He had himself been subjected to it, and in some cases it had saved his life; but this extraordinary power Vulcans had to commune with other minds never failed to impress him. He watched Spock stare at the frightened patient with an unfathomable, even hypnotic gaze, and heard him murmur a few comforting words. Then, when Starkis looked relaxed and quiet, Spock gently placed his fingers on the three vital points on her face, and both closed their eyes. Dr. McCoy silently came and stood by, ready with his medical scanner.

Almost immediately Spock and his patient shuddered violently. An expression of deep anguish appeared on Suzan's face, and was reflected on Spock's. The difficulties, the sorrows he encountered could be seen on his distorted features, his forehead beaded with sweat.

"Bones," Kirk asked, uneasily, in a low tone, "don't you think this is too hard on Spock?"

McCoy, already busy with his scanner, replied, "No, he'll do. I think he can make it."

Indeed as the three onlookers watched, fascinated, they saw a wonderful transformation gradually taking place on Dr. Starkis' tense features. They saw her expression change from distress to confusion, from despondency to hope. It seemed that Spock, gently, patiently, but obstinately, raised her up from the chasm into which she had fallen back to light, and they understood that he had succeeded in this daring endeavour when the young woman's relaxed features expressed at last amazement and serenity. Her plain face looked almost beautiful under Spock's fingers, and tears of joy were trickling down her cheeks. The Vulcan's face, in its more austere way, also expressed the satisfaction of accomplishment.

With a heavy sigh Spock opened his eyes, removed his right hand, and with his fingertips touched Suzan's eyelids; then he broke the meld. She opened her eyes, looked around in wonder, and would have fallen but for the doctor and Nurse Chapel, who supported her and made her sit down. She was very pale, but a dazzling smile lit

her formerly sulky face.

"How do you feel, my dear?" asked McCoy gently.

"I feel wonderful, Doctor, but so tired..."

"Here, drink this," he said, and gave her a cordial. "Take it easy, now - you need to rest after this ordeal."

"Oh, Doctor, I'm so relieved, so thankful," she whispered. Then, looking around, "Where is he? Where is Spock?"

"In my office, with the Captain, and rather tired as well. You've given him a hard time, you know."

And indeed Spock, white and breathless, was propped up against the desk with his eyes closed, supported by Kirk. Very worried, Kirk called McCoy.

"Bones, do something! Spock's passed out."

McCoy came in with a hypo ready, but Spock opened his eyes with an effort and muttered, "Don't, Doctor... none of your drugs. You know they make me sick."

"Damn you, Spock, I can't leave you like this - you're as white as a sheet!"

Spock took a deep breath. "I shall be better presently, Doctor; just leave me alone." Then, looking at his friend, "Thank you, Jim, but I would rather be alone for a while, to recover. If I may, I shall go to my quarters for a few minutes."

Kirk smiled, his eyes alight with affection. "Of course, Spock. Take all the time you need. You've done a great job. Thank you. Now take care of yourself."

Before leaving Spock glanced at the inner room and said to McCoy, "I think the problem is solved, Doctor, and that Miss Starkis will recover. But be gentle with her; she has been in deep trouble, and she has found out how painful it is to admit one's errors, especially for a prehistorian of her reputation. She needs good care."

"Naturally I'll take care of her," retorted McCoy, a bit nettled. "But who said Vulcan have no feelings? Watch out, Spock - I can see compassion in your eyes. Don't let your Human half run away with you."

"Don't let your imagination run away with you, Doctor. My actions were only dictated by the logical consideration of saving such a brilliant mind as Dr. Starkis' in the interests of the scientific community."

"Come off it, Spock. I don't believe it. 'The interests of science', indeed! Baloney! What you've done, my dear Homo Vulcanis, you've done out of sheer kindness. So there!"

Spock's eyebrows almost reached his hairline. Normally he would not have suffered such an insult without a sharp reply, but his extreme fatigue prevented him from doing battle with McCoy, so he bit his lip, turned on his heel and left the office with Vulcan dignity.

Kirk laughed softly. "Nothing doing, Bones! You'll never get him to admit that he has a compassionate heart."

McCoy shrugged and went next door. "Care to see her, Jim?"

Miss Starkis, still dazed by her wonderful experience, greeted the two men with a smile.

"Well, Suzan," said McCoy heartily, "it's good to see you well again."

"Doctor, Captain, I don't know what to say. I realise now that I have made a fool of myself. I don't know how you put up with my stupid behaviour."

"Don't mention it, Dr. Starkis. It's over and forgotten," replied the Captain. "I'm glad you're recovered. You'll be in great form for your mission on Beryl IV when we arrive there tomorrow."

"Yes indeed, Captain. I'm looking forward to my work there, and I have lots of things to prepare now that I've lost so much time with my silly researches."

McCoy looked surprised. "But are you going to give up your search for Homo Vulcanis after all? You never found the answer, did you?"

"I did, Doctor," she replied with a delighted smile. "I did just now. I was looking for him in the wrong place, you see. I was looking in the archaeological layers of the past, in libraries and laboratories, when he was there all the time; and there I found him - in the stars."

The two men exchanged a puzzled glance. "Do you mean that Spock...?"

"Yes, Captain. Spock made me understand that I was taking the wrong direction. He led me along the Vulcan path, to a revelation of Vulcan morals and philosophy, which surpass anything I had imagined. I understand now. At last I've found what I was looking for, and I shall be forever grateful to him. He let me share for a brief moment his spiritual experience, his brilliant intellect, and that is something I will never forget. Your First Officer is a remarkable man, Captain."

"I know that, Miss Starkis," Kirk smiled, "and he is also a staunch and loyal friend."

"I wish I deserved such a friendship," Suzan Starkis said wistfully.

"Who knows?" McCoy put in with a wink. "But it takes time with a Vulcan, doesn't it, Jim? But one thing at a time. You've found your Homo Vulcans at last, haven't you?"

The following day a small group assembled in the transporter room for a brief farewell ceremony. The Captain, Dr. McCoy, Nurse Chapel and many of the officers had come to see Dr. Starkis leave. Mr. Scott himself presided over the operations of beaming.

All the equipment had already been sent down to the planet with a special Security squad, and now came the moment to say goodbye. Suzan Starkis shook hands with everyone as they wished her luck with her mission, and at that moment Mr. Spock came in unobtrusively.

He waited for the handshakes and kissing to be over, then when his turn came he produced a packet of letters and said formally, "Dr. Starkis, if you ever pass by Vulcan in your voyages, here are some letters of recommendation which might be useful. One is for the Director of the Science Section of the Academy of ShiKahr, this one is for my former professor in Vulcan philosophy, and this is for my parents, who would be happy to welcome you."

For a moment the prehistorian remained speechless, then overcoming her emotion she said in a tremulous voice, "You could not give me more pleasure, Mr. Spock. I shall treasure these letters, and I shall never forget you, my Homo Vulcanis!"

While his shipmates laughed aloud Spock permitted himself a faint smile. "Much honoured, Miss Starkis," and raising his hand in salute he added, "Live long and prosper."

In answer she returned the salute, but with a very non-Vulcan smile on her happy face.

Then Captain Kirk escorted her to the platform, stepped back, and said, "Goodbye and good luck, Dr. Starkis."

They were still waving when she disappeared in a shimmer of sparks.

Mr. Scott checked his instruments. "Everything is all right, Captain. Suzie has arrived at the settlement safe and sound," he announced. "Quite a nice lassie, really, but she led us a merry dance, didn't she, Captain?"

"Yes indeed, Scotty. But it's Mr. Spock here who should be complaining, not you, since you won that bottle of whisky."

"Aye, Captain, but I won two of them!" retorted Mr. Scott with pride.

"How come? I thought you bet one bottle with Kaganowitz?"

"That I did, but I secured another one. Do you know what that godforsaken weasel was doing? He was giving information about Mr. Spock's movements to Suzie to help her win the match, so that he would get the bottle. All that trouble for nothing, anyway, thanks to Mr. Spock. So, when I found out what Kaganowitz was up to, to teach him a lesson I fined him another bottle - and one of the best, too. And now," concluded Scott, beaming, "I'll be standing a round in my quarters. Everyone is welcome."

In the midst of the cheers and laughter Mr. Spock, both eyebrows raised to his fringe, slipped away, leaving his Human friends to their festivities.

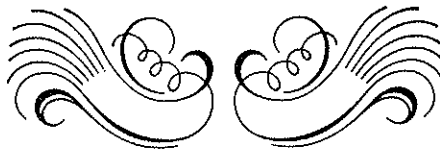


DENIAL - THE ROMULAN COMMANDER

I tell myself
I cannot love thee,
But I do!
And yet I never sought
To be thy bride.
I tell myself
That I should flee
And hide away -
And yet... Oh how
I yearn to reach thy side.

I tell myself
I'd find no place
Among thy kind,
That I am so unfit
To be thy wife.
And yet...
Without thy mind
To enfold mine,
How bitter is
This empty thing called life!

Sheryl Peterson



PHANTOM

How can I miss you
When you've never been here?
When you've never even
Put your hand in mine?
When your voice has never
Echoed in my silence,
And I seem doomed
To be lonely all the time?
When you've never lain beside me
Quietly sleeping,
And my empty arms
Have ached for your embrace?
How can I miss you
Who aren't flesh but phantom,
And I needs must dream
To look upon your face?

Sheryl Peterson

A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIN'

Wide awake still - what a bore.
 Tossing and turning and the clock says four!
 Go down to the lobby - only place open
 It's bright and warm though rather lonely,
 (Only a couple on a sofa kissing).
 Listen to the flickering gasfire hissing,
 Playing patience on the registration table,
 Watching the computers churning out paper.

Got the four in the morning,
 Why aren't I sleeping
 Blues.

Don't mind staying awake for a party,
 (Hate being kept awake by a party)
 But when everyone's snoring
 Not being able to drop off's... boring.
 That's better, someone in reception:
 Tea and toast? At once, no trouble.
 Might as well have an early breakfast
 While I watch the cleaners start in mopping,
 Adding machine shows no sign of stopping.

Got the five in the morning
 Not even yawning
 Shall be later, though,
 Blues.

Lynette Muir

(A tribute to all those who suffer convention insomnia - and a possible solution.)

